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YSU Journal of International Affairs (YSUJIA)

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BEYOND ORDER AND DISORDER: STATECRAFT, GREAT-POWER RIVALRY, HYPER-TRANSACTIONALISM AND INTERMEDIARY STATES

Editorial Foreword

The contemporary international system is increasingly characterized neither by stable order nor by complete disorder, but by what may be termed *hyper-transactionalism*: a condition in which political relationships, security commitments, economic partnerships, and diplomatic alignments become increasingly contingent, negotiable, and subject to continuous renegotiation. Unlike the institutionalized bargains that underpinned the post-Cold War order, *hyper-transactionalism* is marked by the weakening of universal norms, the erosion of predictable strategic commitments, and the growing primacy of situational calculations of power and interest. In such an environment, great powers compete through flexible coalitions, economic coercion, and selective diplomacy, while intermediary states and regional actors seek to become pathfinders in an increasingly fluid geopolitical landscape. The result is an international system that cannot be adequately described through the conventional dichotomy of order and disorder. Rather, it represents a dynamic and contested political space in which power, legitimacy, and security are continuously negotiated across multiple levels of interaction.

The discursive architecture of contemporary global politics functions as a primary engine of statecraft, relying fundamentally upon the continuous, strategic production of spatial imaginaries to sustain its systemic coherence. Modern hegemony thrives on the active, performative scripting of specific territories. By artificially categorizing certain geographies as inherently volatile zones of danger while designating others as purely logistical zones of transit, dominant powers successfully validate and operationalize aggressive material interventions. Today, however, this rigid framework faces unprecedented disruption. We are witnessing an era of radical deterritorialization, a profound geopolitical rupture, where established cartographies and inherited spatial boundaries fracture under the immense weight of novel, transnational performative practices. Consequently, the mapping of the world becomes an exercise in power projection, where cartography serves as a weapon to marginalize alternative modes of existence.

It is within this fraught intersection of collapsing borders and resilient statecraft that the authors in this collection situate their critical inquiry. By meticulously

interrogating these shifting, contested spatialities, they expose the profoundly constructed nature of the international order, effectively stripping away the veneer of geographic inevitability that often shields imperial projects from public scrutiny. The contributors go beyond simple observation by tracing the intricate ways in which diverse political actors actively rewrite the spatial grammar of survival.

Ultimately, the central intellectual contribution of this third issue of the *YSU Journal of International Affairs* emerges from a shared, rigorous commitment to unmasking these performative mechanisms. Taken together, the contributions to this issue suggest that contemporary international politics is entering a period in which the boundaries between order and disorder have become increasingly blurred. The cases examined here reveal an international system shaped not by the disappearance of power, institutions, or norms, but by their ongoing renegotiation amid intensifying geopolitical competition and strategic uncertainty. From the unintended consequences of sanctions and the transformation of intermediary spaces to regional responses to multipolarity, the symbolic foundations of global governance, and enduring traditions of statecraft, the articles demonstrate that agency remains possible even under conditions of structural constraint. Yet they also highlight the growing difficulty of sustaining stable political arrangements in a world characterized by fluid alignments and transactional relationships. By bringing together diverse regional experiences and theoretical perspectives, this issue contributes to a broader understanding of how states and societies find their paths in an era of *hyper-transactionalism*, great-power rivalry, and contested geopolitical futures. In doing so, it invites renewed reflection on the changing nature of international order and on the forms of statecraft required to manage an increasingly fragmented and unpredictable world.

The highlight of this issue is the discussion article by Armenia's Defense Minister Mr. Suren Papikyan, and his advisor, Harutyun Matevosyan, which offers a timely analysis of Armenia's transition from military modernization to comprehensive institutional transformation. Operating at the critical nexus of strategic theory, contemporary statecraft, and high-level policy execution, their contribution dismantles the pervasive assumption that sovereign defense is merely an exercise in technological procurement. The authors argue that sustainable defense capability depends not only on advanced weapons and technologies but also on effective military management, mission command, adaptive command structures, professional military education, human resource development, and organizational learning. By examining the 2024–2035 Transformation Concept, the article demonstrates how decentralized command, a professional NCO corps, improved reserve systems, and enhanced morale collectively form the foundations of a modern, adaptive, and resilient military institution capable of meeting twenty-first-century security challenges. The study persuasively situates Armenia's reforms within broader debates

on contemporary warfare, emphasizing that sustainable defense capabilities arise from institutional quality as much as from technological superiority. Integrating theoretical insights with practical policy analysis, the article presents military transformation as a continuous process of organizational adaptation, offering an important contribution to contemporary scholarship on defense reform, military management, and strategic resilience in small states.

Gor Petrosyan grounds his inquiry by exploring the unintended consequences of economic coercion. His analysis of Armenian strategic maneuvering following the 2022 Western sanctions against Russia reveals a fascinating inversion of vulnerability. Sanctions regimes typically operate on the mechanical presumption that financial isolation forces political capitulation. Petrosyan details how Yerevan actively subverted this logic through a phenomenon he identifies as the “sanctions paradox.” The Armenian state absorbed the sudden influx of displaced financial capital to finance a historic decoupling from its traditional Russian security guarantees. Petrosyan introduces the concept of commercial deterrence to explain this pivot. The government embedded American infrastructural capital directly into its national territory through the TRIPP transit corridor. This maneuver substituted global supply chain integration for the hollow promises of a military patron. The intervention illustrates how small states financialize geographic liabilities into sophisticated asymmetric shields.

Gréta Höhn executes a necessary theoretical disruption by forcing the discipline to confront the unforgiving material realities of geography. Her structural diagnosis of the Russia-Ukraine war discards the prevalent focus on immediate political aggression. Höhn resurrects classical geopolitics to demonstrate the absolute untenability of the intermediary buffer premise in contemporary Eastern Europe. Ukraine suffered a tragedy spatially preordained by its capture between mutually exclusive integration projects. The overlapping claims of the Euroatlantic and Russian spheres rendered sustained neutrality structurally impossible. The collapse of this delicate balancing act exposes a brutal truth regarding modern sovereignty. States occupying heavily polarized pivot spaces face an inevitable descent into deeply institutionalized militarization or coercive territorial dismemberment.

The normative diplomatic frameworks designed to manage such territorial violence face rapid and deliberate degradation. Garik Keryan pivots the editorial focus toward the strategic implications of this institutional collapse by analyzing the projected 2025 shift in United States foreign policy. The New Yalta architecture represents a terrifying retreat into hyper transactional bilateralism. Washington demonstrated a stark willingness during the proposed Alaska summit to bypass traditional European allies. The restrictive ultimatum presented to Kyiv subordinated Ukrainian territorial integrity to extractive rare earth interests. Keryan argues compellingly that replacing multilateral normative commitments with unilateral ultima-

tums permanently institutionalizes regional volatility. The resulting diplomatic paralysis forces secondary powers into unshielded and accelerated arms races across the continent.

Kuralay Baizakova initiates a crucial scalar shift connecting macro-level geopolitical friction directly to localized societal fragility. Her investigation into Central Asian youth radicalization aggressively strips the phenomenon of its conventional ideological mystification. Baizakova synthesizes domestic vulnerability with transnational competition to position extremism strictly as a highly adaptive by-product. This radicalization thrives within specific socioeconomic voids rather than religious vacuums. The digital recruitment logistics utilized by subnational actors are actively facilitated by broader struggles over regional transit routes. This condensed analytical positioning demands a complete rethinking of regional security responses. Reintegration strategies require a holistic approach extending beyond securitized endeavors to address the combustible fusion of global power competition and local marginalization.

The ideological predicates for this contemporary landscape of instability require rigorous historical excavation. Artak Khachatryan and his colleagues completely reframe the temporal arc of our systemic crisis. They shift the locus of analysis away from material capabilities to interrogate the symbolic warfare of the period following the September 11 attacks. The war on terror is conceptualized here as an expansive ontological offensive. The American state manufactured a permanent exception by leveraging the military and entertainment complex to domesticate a rigid civilizational binary. This cultural production successfully masked sweeping geostrategic ambitions across the Eurasian landmass for two decades. The authors argue that the 2021 collapse of the Afghan state represents far more than a localized military catastrophe. It marks the terminal ideological bankruptcy of a unipolar order lacking the capacity to reconcile triumphant cultural narratives with glaring material limitations on the ground.

Vimbiso Juliet Mapfidza decisively dismantles the most pervasive myth dominating contemporary international relations scholarship regarding the Global South. The emergence of a diffused multipolar world is routinely celebrated as a guarantor of structural autonomy for developing nations. Mapfidza anchors her deep interpretive expansion in Southern Africa to expose the severe analytical limits of this celebratory consensus. She shifts the theoretical terrain to critical international political economy to explore the harsh realities of conditional agency. The multiplication of external suitors certainly expands the menu of diplomatic options available to regional actors. This newfound diplomatic agility provides the superficial illusion of authentic sovereign leverage. Yet Mapfidza provocatively demonstrates that the underlying architecture of global capital remains entirely unbroken and largely unquestioned. The absolute parameters of sovereignty are still heavily

dictated by extractive commodity dependence and asymmetric financial hierarchies. Her intervention provides a devastating corrective to the existing literature. It proves that a multipolar global system merely diversifies the managers of systemic inequality without fundamentally altering the economic foundation of exploitation.

Zhak Manukyan concludes this issue with a review of the *Arthashastra*, one of the most sophisticated works on statecraft in world political thought. It highlights Kautilya's systemic conception of governance, integrating institutional organization, enlightened leadership, the Mandala Theory of interstate relations, diplomacy, military strategy, and foreign policy into a coherent analytical framework. The review convincingly argues that Kautilya anticipated key principles of modern political realism and institutional governance while emphasizing the interdependence of domestic stability and external power. By drawing insightful comparisons with Aristotle, it situates the *Arthashastra* within the broader tradition of classical political philosophy. Overall, the review establishes the work as an enduring and indispensable resource for scholars of international relations, strategic studies, and political theory.

Thus, we may note that this issue demonstrates that the contemporary international system is best understood not as a transition from order to disorder, but as the emergence of a condition of *hyper-transactionalism*, in which great-power rivalry, weakening institutional commitments, and the strategic adaptation of intermediary or semi-peripheral states are reshaping the practice of statecraft and the foundations of international order and continuously renegotiated forms of power and security. The contributions assembled in this issue demonstrate that international politics is defined by adaptive dynamics rather than by stable order or pure disorder. Across diverse regional contexts, intermediary states and regional actors are shown not merely as objects of great-power competition but as active participants in shaping geopolitical outcomes. Collectively, these studies underscore that agency persists even under conditions of structural constraint, as well as the growing importance of adaptive statecraft in an increasingly fragmented international landscape and an uncertain geopolitical future.

Dr. Tigran Yepremyan



Editor-in-Chief of YSU Journal of International Affairs

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Editorial Manager of YSU Journal of International Affairs

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FROM MILITARY MODERNIZATION TO ARMY TRANSFORMATION: HUMAN RESOURCE, FORCE STRUCTURE, AND COMMAND REFORM IN THE ARMED FORCES OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA

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Abstract

Contemporary military transformation extends beyond technological modernization, requiring comprehensive institutional reforms that integrate effective military management, adaptive command structures, and human resource development to enhance operational effectiveness. The transformation of the Armed Forces has become a top priority for Armenia, especially after changes in the security architecture following the 2020 44-day war. The Concept for the Transformation of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Armenia (2024–2035) outlines the main goals for military reforms that aim to strengthen the national defense capability. This article explores the concept, focusing on the sphere of military management and human resource development. It examines the modernization of command-and-control systems, the adoption of mission command principles, the establishment of a professional non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps, enhancements in morale and psychological readiness, and the improvement of the reserve and conscription system. The successful institutionalization of reforms will embed adaptive leadership and decentralized command into the organizational culture of the Armenian military. The article argues that the Transformation Concept marks a broader strategic shift from force modernization to institutional transformation, demonstrating that effective military management, mission command, and human resource development constitute the essential foundations of long-term operational effectiveness and resilience.

Keywords: *Armed Forces of Armenia, military management, HR development, Mission Command.*

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the international security system has changed drastically. The nature of traditional warfare is evolving, increasingly accompanied by hybrid threats, cyberattacks, information warfare, the widespread use of unmanned systems, and other advanced technology.¹ For small states, adapting to these changes has become imperative. However, with limited resources, they must rethink their defense strategies and create new ways to improve national security. This pattern is observable from the Middle East to Central Europe, where the breakdown of the existing security environment has driven many countries to reformulate their military doctrines and recalibrate their systems of national security governance.

For Armenia, the changing security environment became mostly urgent after the 2020 44-Day War and the subsequent border skirmishes. This conflict highlighted specific weaknesses in military capabilities and revealed deeper issues in command and control, mobilization organization, intelligence gathering, technological readiness, and strategic planning. These variables showed that isolated reforms were not sufficient and that a complete transformation of the armed forces was essential. On November 12, 2024, the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Armenia released the first official document outlining military reform—The Concept for the Transformation of the Army for 2024–2035.² This Concept serves as a broad plan for modernizing the Armed Forces, reorganizing command and control systems, enhancing the professional component, and advancing technology. It outlines a new philosophy for Armenia's defense policy aimed at creating a modern, flexible, efficient, and highly capable military force. Given the wide-ranging reforms, this article focuses on a specific aspect of the transformation process, *par excellence*, the development of military management systems and the challenges of human resource management.

Hence, the paper analyses how the 2024–2035 Transformation Concept seeks to address deficiencies in military management and human resource development revealed by the 2020-war and to what extent it represents a shift from Soviet-style force management toward a modern mission-command military model. This article employs qualitative document analysis of the Transformation Concept (2024–

¹ Frank G. Hoffman, "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges," *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 52 (2009): 34–39.

² Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Armenia, Concept for the Transformation of the Army of the Republic of Armenia (Yerevan: Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Armenia, 2024).

2035), supplemented by comparative military management literature and contemporary theories of military transformation.

Rather than representing a conventional military modernization program, the 2024–2035 Transformation Concept marks a paradigmatic shift in the Armenian defense doctrine and policy by replacing platform-centered modernization toward institution-based comprehensive military transformation in which mission command philosophy, professional military education, organizational learning, reserve force, and human resource development collectively constitute the institutional foundations of long-term combat effectiveness and defense resilience.

Military Transformation as an Imperative of Defense Reform

Wars often serve as the primary drivers of military reform. Barry Posen, in his work *The Sources of Military Doctrine*, points out that wars significantly impact changes in military doctrines, organizational structures, and operational preparations.³ In the case of Armenia, the 2020 44-day war and ongoing military conflicts marked a significant turning point, revealing that traditional military strategies are insufficient for current battlefields. The contemporary armed conflicts in other regions continue to demonstrate new instruments and methods for future warfare, requiring a reevaluation of military security principles and the overall approach to force development.⁴

Current military operations illustrate the key role of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), rapid intelligence effectiveness, the importance of air superiority, and the growing significance of network-centric command and control systems. They prove that having a large army is no longer enough if it lacks technological superiority, rapid response capabilities, and an effective command and control system. Thus, we can conclude that the transformation of the armed forces starts not only from the need to address existing gaps but also from the strategic need to build technologically advanced, professional, and resilient military forces that can meet future warfare demands. Military transformation should be seen as a long-term and institutional process aimed at boosting the defense capabilities in the national security of Armenia.

Nevertheless, the future effectiveness of Armenia's Armed Forces will therefore depend not only on the pace of military modernization but also on the successful institutionalization of reforms that embed adaptive leadership, professional

³ Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1287fp3>.

⁴ *Transformation Concept*, 2024, 3.

military education, decentralized command, and human capital development into the organizational culture of the Armenian military. The implementation of the Transformation Concept marks the beginning of a sustained process of institutional renewal. Its enduring value will ultimately be determined by the extent to which this strategic vision is translated into effective organizational practices, as sustainable defense capability rests on institutional quality and human capital as much as on technological advancement.

Institutional Foundations of Military Transformation

The Concept for the Transformation of the Army organizes and consolidates these efforts by encompassing a wide range of reforms, from improving the command and control system to enhancing cybersecurity capabilities. Among the different priorities identified in the Concept, particular emphasis is placed on modernizing the command and control system, improving military education, and strengthening the mobilization system. This article will mainly discuss these three areas as key components of the transformation of Armenia's Armed Forces.

Table 1. Three Principal Directions of the Transformation of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Armenia

Reform Area	Main Objectives	Planned Measures	Strategic Priority
 Modernization of the Command and Control System	Increasing the speed of decision-making and ensuring flexibility of command	Reduction of bureaucratic procedures, introduction of digital management tools and automated mechanisms	Of critical importance, as rapid response and effective command are decisive factors in contemporary warfare
 Development of Military Education and Science	Formation of a professional, educated, and initiative-oriented officer corps	Revision of the military education system, introduction of new curricula, and promotion of continuous professional development	Of high strategic importance, as quality human capital constitutes the foundation of military effectiveness and development
 Reform of the Reserve and Mobilization System	Enhancing rapid force generation capabilities and expanding societal participation in national defense	Modernization of reserve management systems and improvement of mobilization mechanisms	Of major importance, as it represents a key instrument for ensuring national resilience and sustained defense, particularly for small states

As shown in Table 1, upgrading the command-and-control system is a top priority. In modern warfare, quick decision-making is significant. The Armed Forces should develop an automated command and control system, as contemporary military environments and battlefields increasingly require rapid, precise, and data-driven decision-making. Modern combat scenarios and the dynamic operational

landscape require commanders to adapt swiftly and respond effectively, allowing them to make independent decisions that can influence operational outcomes. Subordinate commanders and units must also have enough authority to demonstrate initiative and creativity in accomplishing their assigned tasks. In this regard, the Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) concept serves as a notable example, developed by a leading military leader, that emphasizes improving command and control systems by shifting from a centralized decision-making approach to a more decentralized one. This change can significantly improve the effectiveness of operations on the battlefield. The integration of target acquisition and engagement capabilities is also important, but this integration doesn't guarantee mission success. Hence, the push for sixth-generation warfare systems that combine command and control, intelligence, and strike capabilities into one framework is decisive. This integration improves decision-making speed and overall military operation effectiveness.

In the Armed Forces of the Republic of Armenia, the decentralized command and control approach is carried out on the principle of Mission Command. This strategy shows how military operations should be conducted in a decentralized manner, relying on mission-type orders. It grants subordinate commanders the autonomy to exercise their judgment in selecting the most effective methods for accomplishing assigned tasks. The focus here is on building trust, encouraging initiative and creativity, and leveraging the human element in warfare. In this context, creating a professional Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) corps is crucial for strengthening the principle of Mission Command philosophy. It supports the independence of subordinate units while following the commander's overall intent. A professional NCO serves as the first-line leader who, through discipline, skill, and professional behavior, connects enlisted personnel and commissioned officers. Therefore, we confirm that developing a professional NCO corps within the Armed Forces of the Republic of Armenia is a significant step toward the improvement of command and control effectiveness.

As previously mentioned, modernizing the command-and-control system is not effective without adequately preparing the human resources responsible for its implementation. Regardless of how advanced these command and control tools may be, their success ultimately relies on the professional skills, military expertise, and leadership qualities of the commanders using them. Thus, improving military education and developing the officer corps is vital as we work on transforming the Armed Forces. A modern military is built not just on complex command and control systems but also on capable military leaders who can effectively operate them.

Therefore, the Concept envisions transforming the military education system by aligning it with contemporary battlefield requirements.⁵ There is a strong focus on updating military curricula, improving hands-on training, ensuring continuous professional growth for officers, and collaborating with respected foreign military educational institutions. This strategy is completed with international best practices, suggesting that military education should be viewed as an ongoing journey rather than a one-time event during a service career. However, the question arises whether educational reforms can be effective without the simultaneous advancement of military science and research. Essentially, the Transformation Concept proposes a shift towards a knowledge-based military model. This involves promoting military studies, addressing new threats, and carefully analyzing lessons learned from recent conflicts. However, the implementation of the educational reforms faces several challenges.

The institutional transformation of the Armed Forces requires stronger collaboration between military educational institutions and civilian research centers to promote interdisciplinary research, doctrinal innovation, and evidence-based defense policymaking. Contemporary security issues require input from various fields. We also need to encourage a new military culture that values initiative, innovation, and critical thinking among military personnel. This is closely tied to forming a new generation of officers, as the future officer corps will need state-of-the-art education and training to fulfill their roles during military operations. We believe it is necessary to create a new concept for military education and to improve available scientific resources to enhance military regulations, manuals, and other guidelines governing the activities of the Armed Forces.⁶

The Transformation Concept of the Armed Forces of Armenia outlines the need to improve the moral and psychological readiness of the military personnel. This readiness is vital for ensuring the combat effectiveness and resilience of the Armed Forces. As Dwight D. Eisenhower said, “*Morale is the greatest single factor in successful war.*”⁷ This quote highlights that military success relies not just on technological superiority and resources, but also on the psychological strength and commitment of military personnel. Therefore, improving the moral and psychological readiness of the officer corps should be seen as a top priority in the ongoing transformation of Armenia’s Armed Forces.

Accordingly, the development of moral and psychological readiness should be viewed as a continuous and institutionalized component of military transformation. Beyond preparing personnel to withstand the psychological pressures of combat, it

⁵ *Transformation Concept*, 2024, 20.

⁶ *Transformation Concept*, 2024, 21.

⁷ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1948).

seeks to cultivate professional military and patriotic values, strengthen leadership at all levels, reinforce commitment to military service, and enhance the resilience required to operate effectively in the complex and dynamic environment of contemporary warfare. It involves instilling patriotic values in our service personnel, encouraging a thoughtful approach to military duty, developing leadership skills, and building psychological endurance when facing stress.⁸ This issue is particularly significant in contemporary conflicts, where military operations are increasingly embedded within broader information warfare environments characterized by disinformation campaigns and various forms of psychological pressure. In such conditions, the moral and psychological readiness of military personnel becomes an important factor not only for the army but also for national security. Meanwhile, it is also important to understand how to create an effective moral and psychological support system, avoiding purely formal or propaganda approaches. Moral and psychological readiness should be based not only on discipline and a sense of duty, but also on mutual trust, dignity, and respect for the service member.

Another significant aspect of human resource management deals with challenges related to improving the mobilization system and the readiness of reserve forces. Winston Churchill once noted, *"In war, a commander is usually required to do two things: first, devise a good plan for his army, and second, maintain a strong reserve."* This emphasizes that reserve forces are not merely an extra manpower source; they are a vital strategic asset. They provide military leaders with the flexibility and resilience needed during wartime.⁹ The Concept for the Transformation of the Army emphasizes the reforming of the mobilization system and reserve forces as a strategic priority for improving national defense capabilities. For countries with smaller populations and limited human resources, an effective reserve force not only increases military potential but also serves as an essential component of deterrence.

Thus, modernizing the mobilization system should be seen as a key component of military transformation. The Concept proposes a shift to a more flexible and efficient mobilization model, with continuous reservist training and combat readiness program executed through 25-day military training camps. Previously, reserve resources were viewed mainly as backups for major emergencies, but nowadays, security demands a reserve system that can respond quickly, possesses specialized skills, and participates in regular retraining. The reserve registration and management system requires further modernization through the introduction of

⁸ Transformation Concept, 2024, 22.

⁹ Winston Churchill and Andrew Scotland, *Churchill on Men and Events: A Selection from 'Thoughts and Adventures' and 'Great Contemporaries' Made by Andrew Scotland, With Illustrations* (Melbourne, 1965).

regular training programs, periodic refresher courses, and systematic tactical exercises designed to maintain reservists' operational readiness and integration with active forces. This new model of reserve training has significantly affected public perceptions and increased participation in reserve activities in recent years. Furthermore, it has become a priority for state policy. Evidence of this priority is the introduction of criminal penalties for avoiding training assemblies, which emphasizes the importance of public perception and the implementation of state policy.¹⁰

In this light, establishing a territorial defense system is crucial. The main goal of this system is to provide a well-organized and balanced defense complex across the country. As described in Chapter XI of the Transformation Concept, local territorial defense units will be formed using reserve forces, considering the population distribution and available resources.¹¹ These units will mostly consist of second-generation reservists and retired servicemen who will undergo regular training during peacetime for quick mobilization during wartime. The effectiveness of territorial defense forces mostly depends on the level of their combat readiness. Therefore, their training, equipment, and organizational standards should align as closely as possible with those of the regular army. Continuous training and stable personnel are key prerequisites for ensuring teamwork and combat effectiveness within units.

Conclusion

The analysis of the key elements in the Concept for the Transformation of the Armed Forces of Armenia indicates that it extends beyond a set of reforms, representing instead a new strategic vision for military development aimed at building a system capable of effectively addressing contemporary and future defense and security challenges. The transformation of Armenia's armed forces is fundamentally an institutional and organizational process, not merely one of modernization. The successful institutionalization of reforms will embed adaptive leadership, professional military education, and decentralized command into the organizational culture of the Armenian military.

The main focus areas in the Concept, such as modernizing the command-and-control system, enhancing the officer corps and military education, building a knowledge-based military model, improving the moral and psychological readiness of personnel, and improving the reserve and mobilization system, are interconnected. They will only produce meaningful results when executed systematically and

¹⁰ Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia, Article 462, Part 1, <https://www.arlis.am/hy/acts/153080>.

¹¹ Transformation Concept, 2024, 16.

thoroughly. The Concept for the Transformation of the Armed Forces should be seen as an ongoing, long-term endeavor rather than a short-term reform initiative. Its successful implementation is based on the coordinated efforts of government bodies, military organizations, the academic community, and society as a whole. The ultimate aim is to develop armed forces capable of effectively addressing the challenges of the twenty-first century, while ensuring the security, territorial integrity, and sovereignty of the Republic of Armenia over the long term. Additionally, the success of the transformation process will depend not only on adopting new structures and procedures but also on fostering a modern military culture rooted in professionalism, initiative, adaptability, and continuous learning. In this context, the transformation of the Armed Forces should be regarded as an institutional process that combines organizational reforms, human resource development, and technological advancements within a unified framework to strengthen national defense capabilities.

Ultimately, the transformation of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Armenia should be understood not as a finite modernization program but as a continuous process of institutional adaptation. By integrating organizational learning with technological innovation and placing military management, professional military education, mission command, and human capital at the center of defense reform, the 2024–2035 Transformation Concept lays the foundation for a more adaptive, resilient, and combat-effective military, capable of meeting the strategic challenges of an increasingly contested security environment. In this sense, the true measure of the Transformation Concept's success will not be the acquisition of new capabilities alone, but the creation of a professional, adaptive, and learning military institution capable of sustaining operational effectiveness amid an increasingly complex security environment.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The authors affirm that this research did not involve human subjects.

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BEYOND THE TARGET: GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE US SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA ON ARMENIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the unintended systemic consequences of US sanctions against Russia on the Republic of Armenia between 2022 and 2026. Anchored in Sanctions Theory, the study identifies a ‘Sanctions Paradox’: while restrictive measures initially generated short-term economic gains through diverted trade and human capital influxes, they simultaneously accelerated Armenia’s strategic vulnerabilities by eroding Russia’s security guarantees. Specifically, the temporary windfall from re-exports and tech relocations created an unsustainable economic dependency that directly conflicted with Yerevan’s urgent need for political diversification. Utilizing a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach, the research analyzes how this paradox catalyzed a definitive realignment with the West. Central to this shift are the 2025 EU Integration Act and the 2026 TRIPP Framework Agreement, which serve as instruments of ‘Contractual Sovereignty’ and ‘Commercial Deterrence’. By navigating this dual-track reality, the findings offer a novel framework for understanding how intermediary economies leverage institutional pivots to survive great-power economic warfare. Armenia’s trajectory suggests that small-state agency in a sanctioned environment is increasingly defined by security. The article contributes to sanctions theory by demonstrating that consequential effects of sanctions may occur not only within the target state itself, but within intermediary states whose economic and security dependencies are transformed in opposite directions.

Keywords: *US Sanctions, Sanctions Theory, Geopolitical Decoupling, Small-State Agency, Dual-Track Diplomacy.*

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Introduction

Since February 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the international community has witnessed an unparalleled deployment of economic statecraft. With the number of sanctions targeting the Russian Federation now exceeding 20,000, the conventional wisdom in International Relations suggested that such unprecedented pressure would isolate the target and force its neighbors to ‘decouple’ to avoid collateral damage. However, the post-2022 reality in Eurasia has defied these expectations. The global sanctions regime imposed on Russia has engendered a counterintuitive transformation across the post-Soviet space. While the primary objective of these sanctions was to isolate the Russian economy, the secondary effect has been a deepening of economic interdependency between Moscow and its immediate periphery. Following the imposition of unprecedented Western sanctions against Russia, the South Caucasus has emerged as a primary theater for economic and strategic ‘overflow.’ Although intended to isolate the Russian economy, these measures have, through their extraterritorial reach, inadvertently reshaped the structural foundations of neighboring states. Armenia, historically Russia’s loyal strategic partner in the region, finds itself at the center of this transformation.

Current scholarship on the theory of sanctions remains predominantly ‘sender-centric’ or ‘target-centric,’¹ focusing either on the sender’s ability to impose costs or the target’s internal mechanisms for economic survival. Recent scholarship has produced a growing body of research on sanctions against Russia.² However, much of this literature, like earlier theoretical studies, has focused primarily on either the effectiveness of sanctions or their legal dimensions. This framework has so far failed to account for the agency of intermediary states.

¹ Daniel W. Drezner, *The Sanctions Paradox: Economic Statecraft and International Relations*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511549366>; Steve Chan and A. Cooper Drury, “Sanctions as Economic Statecraft: An Overview,” in *Sanctions as Economic Statecraft: Theory and Practice*, ed. Steve Chan and A. Cooper Drury (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2000), 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230596979_1; Gary Clyde Hufbauer, Jeffrey J. Schott, Kimberly Ann Elliott, and Barbara Oegg, *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered*, 3rd ed. (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2009); Richard Nephew, *The Art of Sanctions: A Strategic Framework* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

² Rawi Abdelal and Alexandra Vacroux, “Are the West’s Sanctions on Russia Working?” *Just Money*, October 31, 2022, <https://justmoney.org/are-the-vests-sanctions-on-russia-working/>; Christine Abely, *The Russia Sanctions: The Economic Response to Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009361224>; Angela Borozna and Lada V. Kochtcheeva, *War by Other Means: Western Sanctions on Russia and Moscow’s Response* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-51370-1>; Francesco Giumelli, “A Comprehensive Approach to Sanctions Effectiveness: Lessons Learned from Sanctions on Russia,” *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 30, no. 2 (June 2024): 211–28, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-024-09585-x>.

The ‘bystander’ economies in the South Caucasus are structurally caught between the sanctioning and target powers. Western sanctions have accelerated their economic convergence. Between 2022 and 2024, Armenia experienced a “sanctions-induced windfall,” with GDP growth averaging nearly 8%, one of the highest rates globally.³ This surge was primarily driven by the massive influx of Russian relocants and the emergence of Armenia as a hub for re-exports to the Russian market. However, by early 2026, this economic model had reached a point of diminishing returns. As secondary sanctions tighten and the normalization of trade flows begins, the vulnerabilities of this overreliance are becoming starkly apparent. Russia still controls over 36% of Armenia’s total exports and roughly 60% of its energy needs,⁴ creating a precarious dependency that Moscow has increasingly leveraged as a political tool.

Yet, this economic glue is not translating into political alignment. Parallel to these economic shifts, Armenia has undertaken a radical sovereign recalibration. Disillusioned by the perceived failure of Russian security guarantees—a shift symbolized by the freezing of its Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) membership and the 2025 Washington-mediated peace frameworks—Yerevan has pivoted decisively toward the West. This is evidenced by the April 2025 enactment of the EU Integration Act and the controversial development of Western-backed transit projects like the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) in Syunik. Thus, Armenia has made assertive efforts to politically hedge against Russia and pursue strategic autonomy by navigating a dual-track reality: deepening economic interdependency with Russia while simultaneously pursuing an aggressive drive for political disengagement from Moscow’s sphere of influence. There is a lack of empirical research explaining why deepened economic interdependency is currently acting as a catalyst for political divergence rather than convergence, despite existing theories of liberal institutionalism suggesting that economic integration should lead to political alignment.⁵

This article addresses the above-mentioned geopolitical puzzle: Why, despite deepening economic interdependence and the emergence of new windfalls from the Russian market, is Armenia actively pursuing strategic political divergence from Moscow? The central argument is that while Western sanctions against Russia initially catalyzed Armenian economic growth, they have ultimately triggered a fun-

³ “Armenia GDP Annual Growth Rate,” Trading Economics, accessed March 22, 2026, <https://tradingeconomics.com/armenia/gdp-growth-annual>.

⁴ Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia (Armstat), “Foreign Trade,” accessed March 22, 2026, <https://armstat.am/en/?nid=176>.

⁵ Robert O. Keohane and Lisa L. Martin, “The Promise of Institutional Theory,” *International Security* 20, no. 1 (1995): 39–51, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539214>.

damental and high-risk geopolitical decoupling. The following analysis demonstrates how the contraction of economic gray zones in 2026 has exposed the underlying tensions of Armenia's strategic positioning, forcing a more explicit reckoning between aspirations for EU integration and concerns over economic vulnerability and regional security.

Given these shifting dynamics, it is crucial to understand how the windfalls of the sanctions era have affected Armenia politically, economically, and strategically as it navigates security voids and seeks strategic autonomy in a landscape where old alliances have failed, but new certainties have yet to emerge. The Sanctions Paradox transcends the domain of trade and economic indicators, reflecting deeper transformations in regional identity, social relations, and political orientation. These developments have been reinforced by a range of mutually constitutive factors that accelerate political divergence and therefore occupy a central place in the analysis that follows.

The article argues that sanctions spillovers can generate divergent economic and security outcomes for intermediary states. In Armenia's case, the US and the EU sanctions against Russia simultaneously increased economic interdependence with Russia while undermining the security foundations of the Armenian-Russian alliance. This asymmetry transformed economic dependence from a source of geopolitical alignment into a catalyst for strategic diversification, driving Armenia's gradual integration with Western political and security frameworks.

Research Methodology: This study employs a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach, utilizing a single-case study design focused on Armenia. This design is specifically selected for its capacity to capture the spillover effects of external sanctions phenomena that are inherently nonlinear, multidimensional, and often inadequately captured by purely quantitative models. To ensure a granular understanding of the evolving geopolitical landscape, the research is structured around a phase-based assessment, distinguishing between the Initial Shock/Boom phase (2022–2024), characterized by rapid trade reorientation and migration influxes, and the Stabilization and Decoupling phase (2025–2026), which marks the transition toward institutionalized strategic autonomy. Central to this framework is the analysis of trade volumes, GDP fluctuations, and foreign investment patterns, which makes visible structural transformations within the Armenian economy and the wider reconfiguration of regional trade flows under the impact of sanctions.

To contextualize these economic shifts, the study integrates three layers of interpretive analysis. First, content analysis of official state rhetoric from leaders is conducted to identify the pivot from the Soviet era discourse of fraternity to a language of sovereign pragmatism. This is supplemented by rigorous document analysis of bilateral and multilateral legal frameworks, contrasting legacy Eurasian Eco-

nomic Union (EAEU) treaties with emergent agreements (such as the EU-Armenia CEPA and the C5+1 statements), to identify the specific legal mechanisms states utilize to fence off their political sovereignty from their legacy economic obligations. Finally, the research employs narrative analysis of media coverage and academic discourse to capture the psychological and sociopolitical dimensions of the Russian factor. By triangulating economic indicators with legal and rhetorical shifts, this methodology provides a comprehensive lens for viewing Armenia's efforts to navigate the fractured global order.

The Sanctions Paradox

In February 2022, forecasts by Armenian economists and representatives of financial and economic institutions predicted that Western sanctions imposed on Russia would have painful consequences for Armenia's economy. For example, the Central Bank of Armenia reduced the expected GDP growth from 5.3% to 1.6%.⁶ The experts attributed the emerging risks not to the application of secondary sanctions against Armenian organizations, but to the indirect impact of sanctions imposed on Russia. Key factors included disruptions in supply chains, the devaluation of remittances, and a decline in Armenian exports caused by the drop in purchasing power in Russia. Other concerns were the decrease in labor migration from Armenia to Russia and the potential damage to Armenian financial institutions resulting from the disconnection of Russian banks from the SWIFT system.⁷ Armenia, however, managed to overcome the short-term economic consequences of the anti-Russian sanctions. According to the economic data summary for the first half of 2022, price inflation in Armenia stood at approximately 8%. For comparison, during the same period, inflation reached 11% in neighboring Georgia and over 13% in Azerbaijan.⁸

Nevertheless, the most visible byproduct of the Western sanctions against Russia was the dramatic emergence of Armenia as a strategic intermediary for 'parallel imports' and the re-export of goods to Russia. In 2022, compared to 2021,

⁶ Central Bank of Armenia, *Inflation Report: Monetary Policy Program Q1 2022* (Yerevan: Central Bank of Armenia, 2022), https://www.cba.am/file_manager/Inflation-reports/Inflation-report-I2022en.pdf.

⁷ Seda Hergnyan, "From Exports to Finance: How Armenia Could Suffer from Sanctions Against Russia," *Hetq.am*, February 23, 2022, in Armenian: [Մեղա Հերգնյան, «Արտահանումից մինչև ֆինանսներ. ինչպես Հայաստանը կարող է տուժել Ռուսաստանի դեմ պատժամիջոցներից», *Hetq.am*, 23 փետրվարի 2022], <https://www.hetq.am/hy/article/141544>.

⁸ "Armenia Inflation Rate," Trading Economics, accessed June 11, 2026, <https://tradingeconomics.com/armenia/inflation-cpi>; "Georgia Inflation Rate," Trading Economics, accessed June 11, 2026, <https://tradingeconomics.com/georgia/inflation-cpi>; "Azerbaijan Inflation Rate," Trading Economics, accessed June 11, 2026, <https://tradingeconomics.com/azerbaijan/inflation-cpi>.

Armenia's exports to Russia increased by approximately 192%, while imports grew by about 47%. These high growth rates were maintained in 2023. In 2024, exports saw a slight decrease, while imports continued to grow by approximately 110%.⁹ This surge was not driven by a sudden increase in domestic Armenian production, but rather by the country's role as a logistical gray zone. Commodities ranging from consumer electronics and luxury vehicles to specialized industrial components were imported from global markets, specifically the EU and East Asia, before being processed through the Armenian customs framework for delivery to Russia. This re-export mechanism served as a critical economic lifeline for both actors: it provided the Russian market with access to sanctioned products, while simultaneously fueling a tax revenue surplus and double-digit GDP growth for Armenia.

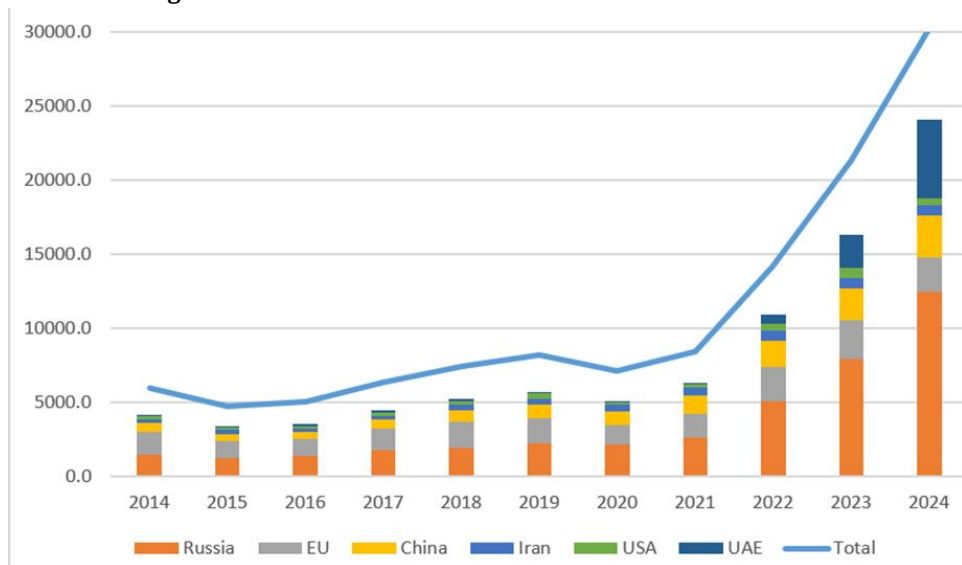
A defining, albeit anomalous, feature of Armenia's 2024 economic activity was the emergence of a high-value circular trade involving Russian precious metals and stones. Following the G7 and the EU's phased restrictions on Russian-origin diamonds and gold,¹⁰ Armenia became a critical processing and re-export node for these commodities. By mid-2024, Armenian exports to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) surged by more than 500%,¹¹ briefly eclipsing traditional markets and establishing the UAE as Armenia's primary export destination. At the core of this phenomenon was Armenia's function as a processing and re-export hub for Russian raw materials. Gold bullion and rough diamonds imported from Russia underwent value-added processing within Armenia before being re-exported to markets in Dubai, generating a significant share of the observed trade expansion.¹² While this loop provided a massive, short-term infusion of liquidity into the Armenian financial system, it also drew heightened scrutiny from the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). By early 2025, as secondary sanctions mechanisms were refined to track the origin of value rather than just the point of shipment, this trade volume began a precipitous decline, signaling the end of the South Caucasus's role as a frictionless conduit for Russian luxury exports.

⁹ Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia (Armstat), "Foreign Trade Database," accessed March 22, 2026, in Armenian: [Հայաստանի Հանրապետության վիճակագրական կոմիտե (Արմստատ), "Արտաքին առևտրի տվյալների բազա," (մուտք՝ 22.03.2026)], <https://www.armstat.am/am/index.php?nid=159&thid%5B%5D=643&submit=%D5%93%D5%B6%D5%BF%D6%80%D5%A5%D5%AC&offset=0>.

¹⁰ "EU, G7 Indirect Russian Diamond Ban Comes into Effect," *Reuters*, March 1, 2024, accessed March 22, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-g7-indirect-russian-diamond-ban-comes-into-effect-2024-03-01/>.

¹¹ Hovhannes Nazaretyan, "Slower Growth, Booming Trade, Declining Births: Armenia in 2024," *EVN Report*, February 11, 2025, <https://evnreport.com/new-updates/armenia-in-2024/>.

¹² Seda Hergnyan, "Armenia: Re-Exporting Billions of 'Dirty' Russian Gold," *Hetq.am*, November 23, 2024, <https://hetq.am/en/article/171035>.

Table 1. Foreign Trade of Armenia

Beyond the surge in trade, the most transformative structural shift in the Armenian economy was the massive influx of human capital, a phenomenon defined by the relocation of roughly 110,000 Russian professionals following the 2022 mobilization.¹³ About 60,000 of them remained in Armenia for more than a year.¹⁴ This was not merely a movement of passive wealth, but a wholesale transplant of the Russian high-tech ecosystem. Major industry players like Yandex, NVIDIA, and DataArt rapidly expanded their Yerevan offices.

This injection of high-productivity labor served as the primary engine behind Armenia's remarkable macroeconomic performance, sustaining real GDP growth rates of 12.6% in 2022 and 8.3% in 2023—the highest in the region. By 2024, the ICT sector's contribution to GDP surged to approximately 7–9%, with the total number of tech professionals in the country doubling from 20,000 to over 44,000.¹⁵ While 2025 and early 2026 have seen a normalization as some specialists moved on to the EU or Montenegro, a significant core remains integrated. This relocant-

¹³ Nicolas Bouchet, "Democratic Russian Civil Society Outside Russia? A Window of Opportunity for Support," German Marshall Fund of the United States, July 22, 2024, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/democratic-russian-civil-society-outside-russia-window-opportunity-support>.

¹⁴ Benjamin Poghosyan, "How Russian Migration Fuels Armenia's IT Sector Growth," Applied Policy Research Institute of Armenia (APRI Armenia), November 6, 2023, <https://apri.institute/how-russian-migration-fuels-armenias-it-sector/>.

¹⁵ Emerging Europe, "IT Sector in Focus: Armenia," *Emerging Europe*, February 3, 2026, <https://emerging-europe.com/it-sector-in-focus-armenia/>.

driven growth provided the Armenian state with the fiscal surplus evidenced by the \$79 million in tax contributions from the top 1,000 IT taxpayers in 2024, necessary to fund its strategic pivot toward Western frameworks.

The final pillar of Armenia's sanctions-driven expansion was the unprecedented growth of its domestic financial sector. Acting as a critical hub for both relocants and regional trade, Armenian commercial banks became the primary infrastructure for cross-border capital flows. In 2022, non-commercial transfers grew by approximately 88%, contributing to the appreciation of the Armenian dram. This influx significantly boosted domestic consumption and the demand for services. Furthermore, driven by the arrival of non-residents and their associated banking transactions, Armenian banks recorded a net profit in 2022 that was three times higher than in 2021.¹⁶

In 2024, total transfers to Armenia through the banking system reached approximately \$5.8 billion, with Russia accounting for 65% of these inflows.¹⁷ However, a significant portion of these funds was not absorbed locally; instead, Armenia functioned as a financial transit point, with nearly 20% of these volumes subsequently transferred to third countries, primarily the United Arab Emirates. While this surge tripled the banking sector's profits in the early years of the conflict, by 2025 and 2026, the sector faced a compliance crisis. The inclusion of major players like Unibank in the EU's 20th sanctions package¹⁸ signaled the end of the South Caucasus as a frictionless financial bridge. Consequently, Armenian banks have increasingly internalized the risks associated with Western secondary sanctions, adopting more restrictive compliance and lending policies that have significantly reduced access to credit for firms engaged in large-scale trade with Russia.

By early 2026, the sanctions-induced 'gold rush' that had characterized the Armenian economy for nearly three years had given way to a soberer assessment of its sustainability and geopolitical consequences. The exceptional growth of the 2022–2024 period, driven largely by Armenia's function as a critical intermediary in the reconfiguration of regional trade networks, has begun to confront the struc-

¹⁶ Central Bank of Armenia, "Total Money Transfers of Individuals Sent to and Received from Abroad through Commercial Banks of RA by Countries," accessed March 22, 2026, in Armenian: [Central Bank of Armenia, "ՀՀ բանկերի միջոցով ֆիզիկական անձանց անունով արտերկրներից մուտք եղած և ՀՀ-ից ֆիզիկական անձանց կողմից արտերկիր կատարված ամսական փոխանցումներ ըստ երկրների | CBA," accessed March 22, 2026], <https://www.cba.am/hy/statistics/total-money-transfers-of-individuals-sent-to-and-received-from-abroad-through-commercial-banks-of-ra-by-countries/194>.

¹⁷ Ani Grigoryan, "Money Flows and Re-Exports: How Armenia Became a Transit Hub in the Shadow of Sanctions," *Caucasus Watch*, June 29, 2025, <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/money-flows-and-re-exports-how-armenia-became-a-transit-hub-in-the-shadow-of-sanctions.html>.

¹⁸ "Armenian Bank Faces EU Sanctions," *Azattyun*, February 9, 2026, accessed June 11, 2026, <https://www.azattyun.am/a/33673447.html>.

tural, regulatory, and geopolitical limits of that model. This shift is most visible in the cooling of trade relations with Russia. After reaching a historic peak in 2024, bilateral trade plummeted to approximately \$6.7 billion for the 2025 period¹⁹ as international monitoring tightened and the lucrative ‘gold and diamond’ transit routes were effectively dismantled.

This period is best characterized as a normalization rather than a crisis. International financial institutions, including the World Bank,²⁰ have noted that the unwinding of these temporary re-export surges has allowed Armenia’s GDP growth to return to its long-term sustainable potential of approximately 4.9% to 5.2% for 2026. However, the correction has also highlighted deep-seated vulnerabilities. As the lucrativeness of transit trade fades, Russian commercial actors have become increasingly wary of the Armenian market, citing both the threat of secondary sanctions and the growing political distance between Yerevan and Moscow.²¹ Consequently, this ‘trade slump’ serves as the primary catalyst for the Armenian government’s 2026 diversification strategy, moving away from a role as a logistical intermediary toward a more sovereign, Western-integrated economic framework.

Armenia’s Increasing Dependency on Russia

The most rigid constraint on Armenia’s strategic autonomy is its profound structural dependency on the Russian energy complex. Despite the political ‘freeze’ in 2025 and 2026, the physical reality of Armenia’s energy security remains binary. Approximately 85% of Armenia’s natural gas is imported from Russia via the North Caucasus-Transcaucasia pipeline, controlled by Gazprom Armenia, a 100% subsidiary of the Russian state giant. While Armenia does import gas from Iran, this is strictly regulated by the Gas-for-Electricity swap agreement. This arrangement is not a substitute for domestic heating or industrial use; rather, Iranian gas is exclusively converted into electricity at the Yerevan Thermal Power Plant and exported back to Tehran at a ratio of 3 kWh per 1 cubic meter of gas.²² This technical loop means that while Iran provides some balancing utility, it does not currently

¹⁹ “Russia Still Armenia’s Top Partner Despite Sharp Fall in Trade,” *Azattyun*, January 12, 2026, accessed June 11, 2026, <https://www.azattyun.am/a/33646125.html>.

²⁰ World Bank, *Armenia’s Economic Pulse: Fairer Markets for Inclusive Growth* (Washington, DC: World Bank, November 21, 2025), accessed June 11, 2026, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/armenia/publication/armenia-economic-pulse-fairer-markets-for-inclusive-growth>.

²¹ SpecialEurasia OSINT, “Trade as Leverage in Russia-Armenia Bilateral Relations,” *SpecialEurasia*, March 11, 2026, accessed June 11, 2026, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2026/03/11/trade-russia-armenia-leverage/>.

²² “Armenia, Iran Agree to Increase Mutual Gas and Electricity Supplies,” *Interfax*, March 30, 2026, accessed June 11, 2026, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/93459/>.

offer a viable alternative to Russian gas for the Armenian consumer or the national grid's base-load requirements.

This dependency is further deepened by the Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant (ANPP), which provides roughly 30–40% of the country's electricity. The plant is not only reliant on Russian-sourced nuclear fuel rods, but its life-extension projects through 2026 have been primarily managed and financed by Rosatom. Even as the government discusses a Modular Reactor partnership with the United States (as noted in the 2024–2026 diplomatic memos), the physical infrastructure of Metsamor remains a Russian technological enclave.²³

Furthermore, the internal distribution of this energy has shifted from a point of regulatory friction to a full-scale institutional confrontation. Electric Networks of Armenia (ENA), the country's sole electricity distributor, owned by the Tashir Group, remains the primary battleground for Armenia's domestic energy sovereignty. This tension culminated in July 2025, when the Public Services Regulatory Commission (PSRC) took the unprecedented step of appointing Romanos Petrosyan, the former head of the State Supervision Service, as the interim manager of ENA.²⁴ This move effectively signaled a temporary nationalization of management aimed at investigating systemic fraud, frequent grid failures, and the slow implementation of investment programs that the government labeled as "strategic sabotage."²⁵

By early 2026, this intervention had created a unique dual-power dynamic within the utility sector. While the company still officially remains under the ownership of the Russian-Armenian Tashir Group, its day-to-day operations and financial audits are under strict state surveillance. This development is not merely about utility maintenance; it is a calculated effort by the Pashinyan administration to dismantle the private-sector link between the Moscow-based diaspora and Armenia's essential infrastructure.

For decades, the seasonal labor migration to Russia acted as the invisible social security system for some parts of rural Armenia. However, by 2026, this decades-old bridge is undergoing a structural collapse. What was once a reliable stream of hard currency has been eroded by the persistent volatility of the Russian ruble and the rising costs of living within a sanctioned Russian economy, making the traditional seasonal trip increasingly less viable for the Armenian worker. The

²³ "Nuclear Power in Armenia," World Nuclear Association, updated February 2026, accessed March 30, 2026, <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-a-f/armenia>.

²⁴ "Romanos Petrosyan Appointed Interim Manager of Electric Networks of Armenia," *Armenpress*, July 18, 2025, <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1225176>.

²⁵ "Armenia Faces Mounting Hybrid Threats Aimed at Sabotage, Warns Intelligence Agency," *Armenpress*, January 20, 2026, <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1240049>.

number of Armenian seasonal workers in Russia has dropped by roughly 30%, falling from 100,000 to fewer than 70,000 in just three years.²⁶ The numbers tell a story of rapid disconnection: the net inflow of remittances from Russia plummeted by over 52% in 2024, and this downward trend has solidified through 2025 and early 2026.²⁷

The reorientation of labor flows away from Russia has been partially absorbed by domestic economic expansion. Many workers who previously built apartments in Moscow are now finding higher-paying opportunities in Armenia's own construction sector, which grew by a substantial 18–20% in 2025.²⁸ However, for the rural families who remain dependent on transfers, this transition is painful. The 'correction' in remittances is forcing a reluctant but necessary diversification of the Armenian labor force.

Armenia's traditional industries, including agriculture, textiles, and food processing, remain structurally embedded within the Russian economic sphere. This pattern reflects not merely economic convenience, but a persistent quality gap in production and regulatory compliance. For decades, the EAEU has provided a tariff-free market for Armenian exports that do not yet satisfy the European Union's more stringent phytosanitary and packaging standards. While the Armenian government pursues a political break from Moscow, the World Bank's 2024 Trade Competitiveness Diagnostic reveals a sobering structural reality:²⁹ Armenia is becoming more, not less, dependent on the EAEU's framework. Armenia's membership in the EAEU has effectively raised the cost of innovation. By being tied to the EAEU's Common External Tariff (CET), Armenian businesses face higher costs for high-quality machinery and raw materials from the West. This "tariff wall" makes it difficult for local manufacturers to produce goods that are competitive enough for the European market, perversely reinforcing their reliance on the less-demanding Russian consumer base. For the average villager in the Ararat Valley, diversification is not a political slogan; it is a daunting technical hurdle that requires expensive certifications and a complete reimagining of their production chain.

²⁶ Arshaluys Barseghyan, "Armenian Seasonal Workers in Russia Drop by 30%," *OC Media*, March 5, 2026, <https://oc-media.org/armenian-seasonal-workers-in-russia-drop-by-30/>.

²⁷ "Net Inflow of Remittances from Russia to Armenia in 2024 Decreased by 52.3% – Ministry of Finance," *ArmBanks*, February 4, 2025, <https://armbanks.am/en/2025/02/04/259908/>.

²⁸ "Construction Remains Leading Sector in Armenia's Economy," *Armenpress*, January 26, 2026, <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1240518>.

²⁹ World Bank, "Armenia Trade Competitiveness Diagnostic," World Bank, November 7, 2024, accessed March 30, 2026, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/factsheet/2024/11/07/armenia-trade-competitiveness-diagnostic>.

The World Bank report also highlights a dangerous concentration in Armenia's export profile. Excluding the temporary re-export "miracle," over 80% of Armenia's merchandise exports remain primary products and unprocessed commodities, such as copper ores (which alone represent 25% of exports). This lack of complexity is the anchor that prevents a true pivot. Furthermore, the World Bank notes a divergence in trade destinations: while Armenia's exports to the EU accounted for 43% of its total in 2011, they had withered to just 23% by 2021, even before the current conflict. For researchers examining 2026 developments, the geopolitical pivot appears as a structurally asymmetric process. It is primarily driven by the expansion of high-tech services, which operate through transnational and non-territorial economic networks, while manufacturing and agriculture remain embedded in lower-complexity, Russia-centered value chains and production regimes.

The Geopolitical Pivot and the Security Void

Following the 2020 war, Moscow established a "triple monopoly" over the South Caucasus. First, it positioned itself as the sole peacekeeper, with almost 2,000 troops in Nagorno-Karabakh,³⁰ acting as the only physical barrier to ethnic cleansing. Second, it served as the principal mediator in the post-war settlement process, whereas Western diplomatic initiatives remained largely peripheral. Consequently, the Moscow track became the primary framework through which Baku and Yerevan negotiated both the normalization of bilateral relations and the reopening of regional transport routes.³¹ Third, Moscow positioned itself as the primary military modernizer, with a 2021 agreement promising a total renovation of the Armenian Armed Forces to "Russian standards."³²

This hegemony was backed by the presence of Russian FSB border guards, not only on the traditional Turkish and Iranian frontiers, but also as "stabilizing tripwires" along the new, volatile Armenian-Azerbaijani borders.³³ In this era, Ar-

³⁰ "Statement by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the President of the Russian Federation," Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, November 10, 2020, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2020/11/10/Announcement/>.

³¹ Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, "Joint Statement Issued Following Meeting between Nikol Pashinyan, Vladimir Putin and Ilham Aliyev," January 11, 2021, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2021/01/11/Nikol-Pashinyan-Moscow-meeting-Announcement/>.

³² Sargis Harutyunyan, "Russian Official Says Armenia Signs Arms Supply Contracts in Moscow," Azatutyun, August 25, 2021, accessed June 11, 2026, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31428119.html>.

³³ Eduard Abrahamyan, "Russia's Growing Military Deployment in Syunik: A Challenge to Armenian Sovereignty and Defense," Institute for Security Analysis (ISA) Research Memo (October 2023),

menia's "unquestioned trust" in Russia was a structural reality; Yerevan viewed Moscow not merely as an ally, but as the foundational guarantor of its statehood. The "modernization promise" was the carrot keeping Armenia within the CSTO orbit, predicated on the belief that Russia remained a potent, reliable neighbor capable of projecting power.

The February 2022 invasion of Ukraine acted as the primary "disruptor" of this architecture. As Russia became bogged down in a protracted war of attrition, its political and military capacity was cannibalized. The most visible failure was military-technical: Armenia had prepaid approximately \$400 million for Russian weaponry that was never delivered, as the hardware was diverted to the Ukrainian front. By 2024, the share of Russian arms in Armenia's procurement had plummeted from 96% to just 10%.³⁴

Furthermore, the imposition of Western sanctions reconfigured Russia's strategic priorities in the South Caucasus. The growing importance of Azerbaijan and Turkey as logistical and transit partners elevated their significance within Moscow's regional strategy, diminishing the relative weight of Armenia's traditional role as a security ally. The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) through Azerbaijan and trade routes through Turkey became vital for bypassing sanctions. The shifting energy landscape between 2022 and 2026 has positioned Turkey and Azerbaijan as critical nodes for Russian hydrocarbon flows, often enabling the circumvention of Western sanctions through complex re-export and "gas-blending" mechanisms. Although official Baku denies importing Russian gas for re-export, analysts highlight a swapping logic, in which Azerbaijan utilizes Russian gas for domestic consumption to free up its own Caspian volumes for the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC). This allows Europe to ostensibly replace Russian energy with Caspian gas while the total regional balance remains supported by Moscow. By leveraging the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, Azerbaijan provides a veneer of diversification for European markets that, in reality, remain deeply integrated into the broader Russian energy matrix.³⁵ This reality shifted Russia's role in the South Caucasus from a balanced arbiter to a stakeholder in the "Turkic partnership." This created a security void in which Rus-

<https://securityandanalysis.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Russias-Growing-Military-Deployment-in-Syunik-A-Challenge-to-Armenian-Sovereignty-and-Defense-1.pdf>.

³⁴ Jakob Hedenskog, "The Armenian Dilemma after Azerbaijan's September Attack on Nagorno-Karabakh," *Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS)*, 2023, <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/the-armenian-dilemma-after-azerbaijans-september-attack-on-nagorno-karabakh/>.

³⁵ Gubad Ibadoghlu, "Azerbaijan in the Gray Zone: Shadow Energy Trade and Russian Sanctions Circumvention," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, January 1, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5295947>.

sia's inaction in the face of Azerbaijani incursions was not a failure of capability, but a calculated diplomatic and political trade-off for its own economic survival.

Azerbaijan strategically capitalized on this Russian overstretch. Recognizing that Moscow was paralyzed by the Ukraine conflict and fearful of a potential second front in the Caucasus, Baku initiated a strategy to systematically sideline the Russian mediation track. By launching attacks on sovereign Armenian territory in September 2022 and blockading the Lachin Corridor in December 2022, Baku proved that the Russian tripwire was hollow. The culmination of this strategy was the September 2023 offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh. The passivity of Russian peacekeepers during the ethnic cleansing of 100,000 Armenians marked the final collapse of the 2020 Trilateral Statement's legitimacy. For Baku, this was the "calculated confrontation" that removed Russia from the peace process. The failure of Russia's security guarantees led to the "freezing" of Armenia's membership in the CSTO, representing a profound fracture in the post-Soviet security architecture. While Prime Minister Pashinyan formally announced the suspension in February 2024,³⁶ by March 2026, the Armenian Foreign Intelligence Service had characterized the process as irreversible. The presence of Russia's 102nd Military Base in Gyumri remained as an element of Armenia's inherited security framework, yet Armenian policymakers increasingly viewed it as subordinate to the country's broader strategic realignment and deepening engagement with Western partners.

As Russia's mediating role diminished following its invasion of Ukraine, the EU sought to fill this diplomatic gap. Between 2022 and 2023, European Council President Charles Michel led what became known as the "Brussels Track"—an effort to broker peace based on European principles and values. Yet despite genuine diplomatic efforts, this process revealed a difficult reality: mediation without concrete security guarantees struggles to produce lasting results.

Although Michel successfully facilitated high-level meetings between Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders, the European mediation faced significant structural constraints. The EU lacked a military presence in the region and had no unified defense policy to support its diplomatic efforts. Moreover, European energy dependency on Azerbaijani gas complicated the bloc's ability to apply meaningful pressure. This asymmetry became evident in practice: Azerbaijan participated in Brussels summits while simultaneously taking military action on the ground. The limitations of this approach became clear in September 2023, when Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian population was forcibly displaced despite months of Euro-

³⁶ "Armenia Freezes Participation in Russia-Led Security Bloc—Prime Minister," *Reuters*, February 23, 2024, accessed June 11, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/armenia-freezes-participation-russia-led-security-bloc-prime-minister-2024-02-23/>.

pean diplomatic engagement.³⁷ The EU issued statements expressing concern and calling for restraint, but implemented no concrete measures to prevent the outcome.

In February 2023, the EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA) was launched and extended through February 2027 with over 200 international observers.³⁸ It represented a shift in the South Caucasus security architecture. For the first time, a Western civilian monitoring presence has been deployed along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, offering an alternative to Armenia's traditional dependence on Russian security guarantees. While unarmed, the mission functions as a stabilizing force. Previously, border incidents existed in an information vacuum in which competing narratives went unverified. The EUMA has transformed this dynamic. This transparency has effectively constrained low-intensity provocations and created what observers call a "strategic pause," and military actions now occur under the direct scrutiny of EU member states. The mission thus represents more than monitoring; it marks the internationalization of Armenia's border security, gradually shifting the country from exclusive reliance on post-Soviet security frameworks toward integration with European stability mechanisms.

Following a successful civil society petition (with more than 50,000 signatures), Armenia's parliament adopted the EU Integration Act in March 2025.³⁹ It represented a shift in Armenia's foreign policy, moving the country to institutional alignment with the EU.

The emergence of a Washington-led diplomatic track in 2025 represents a significant shift in Armenia's approach to regional security. After experiencing the limitations of exclusive reliance on Russia and finding that European diplomatic engagement, while valuable, lacked enforcement capacity, Armenia has sought a partnership with the US as an additional pillar of its security strategy. This represents what international relations scholars call "external balancing," a smaller state diversifying its security partnerships in response to changing regional power dynamics.

The South Caucasus has emerged as an increasingly significant component of US regional strategy. American engagement has focused on fostering alternative energy and transport corridors that enhance regional connectivity while contributing to broader efforts to reduce Europe's dependence on Russian energy supplies.

³⁷ Gabriel Gavin, *Ashes of Our Fathers: Inside the Fall of Nagorno-Karabakh* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2025), 33–36.

³⁸ "About European Union Mission in Armenia," European Union External Action Service (EEAS), accessed March 30, 2026, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/euma/about-european-union-mission-armenia_en?s=410283.

³⁹ "Armenian Parliament Adopts EU Bill at Second Reading," *Armenpress*, March 26, 2025, <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1215464>.

This involves supporting what planners call the “Trans-Caspian corridor,” an infrastructure project connecting Central Asian energy resources to European markets while bypassing both Russian and Iranian territory.⁴⁰ Beyond economic considerations, the current US security doctrine identifies the South Caucasus as a critical “bridge” for transcontinental trade, aimed at reducing the geopolitical leverage of Russia and Iran.⁴¹ Central to this framework is the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP), a strategic transit corridor traversing southern Armenia that establishes direct connectivity between Azerbaijan and its Nakhichevan exclave. In Washington’s view, securing this route is a primary national interest because it facilitates the flow of Central Asian energy and goods to Europe while bypassing sanctioned Russian territory. By facilitating the August 2025 Washington Peace Summit, the US has sought to fill the “security void” left by the decline of the Russian-led CSTO, effectively framing regional stability not only as a diplomatic goal but also as a prerequisite for American-led infrastructure investments and the protection of global supply chains.

The TRIPP, formalized in January 2026, represents a concrete expression of this American strategic engagement. The framework offers a practical solution to one of Armenia’s most pressing challenges: how to provide transit access through its southern Syunik region to connect Azerbaijan with its exclave of Nakhichevan, while maintaining sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The arrangement is structured around an economic partnership rather than a territorial concession. A consortium led by American companies holds a 74% stake in managing the transport corridor’s logistics operations, while Armenia retains 26% ownership and, crucially, full legal jurisdiction over the territory. This means that while international operators manage the commercial aspects of the route, Armenian authorities maintain complete control over customs, law enforcement, and border security.⁴²

This model represents a departure from earlier Azerbaijani proposals that would have placed the road under external oversight. Instead, it addresses Azerbaijan’s demand for reliable transit access while preserving Armenia’s sovereign control, an approach that seeks to resolve what had been framed as an existential dilemma for Armenian statehood. The corridor thus functions as both economic in-

⁴⁰ Luke Coffey, “Trans-Caspian Pipeline Could Be a Regional Game Changer,” Hudson Institute, accessed March 31, 2026, <https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/trans-caspian-pipeline-could-be-regional-game-changer-luke-coffey>.

⁴¹ Kamran Bokhari, “The South Caucasus’ Economic Promise And The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy,” *Forbes*, December 15, 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kamranbokhari/2025/12/15/the-south-caucasus-economic-promise-and-the-2025-us-national-security-strategy/>.

⁴² U.S. Department of State, *The TRIPP Implementation Framework (TIF)*, January 2026, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/TRIPP-Implementation-Framework.pdf>.

infrastructure and a mechanism for stabilizing relations, backed by substantial American commercial and strategic interest in its success.

Within Armenia's foreign policy logic, beyond its economic function, the TRIPP serves an important strategic purpose: it makes Armenia's territorial integrity a matter of international commercial interest. By investing substantially in long-term infrastructure development, including 99-year operating rights, the US has tied its economic interests directly to the stability of Armenia's southern borders and has thus become an important part of the solution to the decades-long conflict.⁴³ The corridor is designed to transport critical minerals from Central Asia to Western markets, making it a significant component of global supply chains.

This economic integration is presumed to create a form of deterrence different from traditional military guarantees. Any military action threatening the corridor would disrupt not only regional stability but also a major international transit route backed by American commercial interests. In practical terms, this shifts Armenia's security calculation: rather than relying solely on military alliances, the country's safety becomes intertwined with the smooth functioning of international trade infrastructure valued by major powers.

The TRIPP thus represents more than a transport route.⁴⁴ It positions Armenia as a link in the broader Middle Corridor connecting Asia to Europe, an alternative to routes controlled by Russia. This integration raises the potential costs of regional conflict for all parties involved, as military escalation would now carry significant economic consequences for international stakeholders with substantial investments in the region's stability.

Armenia's partnership with the US has expanded beyond infrastructure into critical technology and energy sectors. A series of agreements signed between August 2025 and February 2026 reflects this deepening relationship. The most significant development came on February 9, 2026, when Prime Minister Pashinyan and US Vice President JD Vance signed a civil nuclear cooperation agreement, known as the "123 Agreement."⁴⁵ This framework creates the legal and financial founda-

⁴³ Stephen Blank, "Trump Makes a Move in the Caucasus," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, August 20, 2025, accessed June 11, 2026, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13887-trump-makes-a-move-in-the-caucasus.html>.

⁴⁴ Laura Luciani, "What the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity Means for the South Caucasus – and for the People Living There," Ghent University, accessed March 31, 2026, https://www.ugent.be/ps/politiekewetenschappen/gies/en/research/publications/gies_papers/2025-one-year-trump/what-the-trump-route-for-international-peace-and-prosperity-means-for-the-south-caucasus-and-for-the-people-living-there.htm.

⁴⁵ "Joint Statement on the Completion of Negotiations on an Agreement for Peaceful Nuclear Cooperation Between the United States of America and Armenia," U.S. Embassy in Armenia, accessed March 31, 2026, <https://am.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-on-the-completion-of-negotiations-on-an-agreement-for-peaceful-nuclear-cooperation-between-the-united-states-of-america-and/>.

tion for Armenia to modernize its energy infrastructure. The plan envisions the replacement of the Soviet-era Metsamor nuclear power plant, which continues to operate using Russian technology, with American small modular reactors by the early 2030s. This represents a fundamental shift in Armenia's energy security, reducing dependence on Russian nuclear expertise and aligning the country's power generation with Western technical standards.

Parallel developments are occurring in advanced technology sectors. In August 2025, an innovation partnership agreement facilitated Armenia's first acquisition of sophisticated computing equipment for an AI development center in Yerevan, involving NVIDIA and US-authorized technology suppliers. This initiative aims to develop a specialized technology sector in Armenia, generating domestic expertise and strengthening economic linkages that increasingly integrate the country into Western innovation ecosystems.⁴⁶ Together, these agreements signal a deliberate effort to reorient Armenia's most strategic sectors, energy and advanced technology, away from exclusive dependence on post-Soviet frameworks toward integration with Western standards and partnerships.

Military cooperation has also evolved significantly. The Eagle Partner 2025 joint exercises and ongoing defense consultations are helping Armenia's armed forces adopt NATO-compatible practices and standards, moving away from Soviet-era military doctrine.⁴⁷ While the US has been cautious about providing major weapons systems, partly due to Armenia's existing treaty obligations, cooperation has focused on areas that can meaningfully enhance Armenia's defensive capabilities.

These military-to-military ties, combined with the economic and technology partnerships discussed earlier, form an interconnected framework. The modernization of Armenia's defense sector is occurring alongside and is mutually reinforcing with the transformation of its economy and the diversification of its international partnerships. Together, these developments represent a coherent strategy of reducing exclusive dependence on any single partner while building new institutional relationships with Western countries.

Discussion

Armenia's trajectory between 2022 and 2026 offers important insights into how smaller states navigate major geopolitical shifts. Rather than passively accepting

⁴⁶ Ani Toroyan, "Why 2025 Mattered for Armenia's Tech Sector," *EVN Report*, January 14, 2026, <https://evnreport.com/creative-tech/why-2025-mattered-for-armenias-tech-sector/>.

⁴⁷ Giuliano Bifulchi, "Eagle Partner 2025: Analysing Armenia–US Military Drills," *SpecialEurasia*, August 14, 2025, accessed June 11, 2026, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2025/08/14/armenia-us-eagle-partner-25/>.

predetermined alignments, Armenia has pursued an active strategy of diversifying its international partnerships. The adoption of the EU Integration Act in 2025 and the TRIPP Implementation Framework in 2026 represent more than symbolic gestures; they are concrete steps toward building what policymakers call a “multi-pillar” approach to national security. This strategy acknowledges a fundamental reality: relying exclusively on any single partner for security can leave a country vulnerable when that partner’s interests or capabilities change. Instead, Armenia has sought to develop complementary relationships with multiple actors: the EU for institutional support and normative alignment, the US for strategic partnership and economic integration, while maintaining pragmatic ties with others where interests align. The goal is not to replace one exclusive relationship with another, but to create overlapping frameworks that together provide greater stability and autonomy.

A key finding of this analysis concerns the fundamental shift in Russia’s role in the South Caucasus. Between 2022 and 2026, Russia transitioned from serving as a regional security provider to prioritizing its relationships with Turkey and Azerbaijan. This change created a security gap that Armenia had to address through alternative partnerships. Armenia’s freezing of its participation in the CSTO military alliance reflects this deeper reality rather than causing it. Fundamentally, Russia no longer has the capacity or the neutrality to serve as an effective security guarantor for Armenia while simultaneously deepening ties with Azerbaijan. The events of 2023, particularly the displacement of Nagorno-Karabakh’s Armenian population without Russian intervention despite peacekeeping commitments, made this clear to Armenian policymakers.

The implication for small states in similar positions is straightforward: when a traditional security partner’s interests diverge from their own, maintaining exclusive reliance on that relationship becomes untenable. In an increasingly multipolar international system, security requires diversification rather than exclusive alignment. For Armenia, this has meant seeking to internationalize its security through economic integration and partnerships with multiple actors, rather than depending solely on any single power.

The geopolitical deadlock in the South Caucasus was long defined by two clashing paradigms: Azerbaijan’s insistent demand for a “corridor” that threatened Armenian sovereignty, and Armenia’s “Crossroad of Peace” proposal, which advocated for the opening of all regional routes under national jurisdictions. The TRIPP emerged as a consensus that bridged these positions. Unlike previous “corridor” models that risked creating “islands” of foreign control, the TRIPP introduces the concept of “Commercial Sovereignty.” It guarantees unimpeded passage for inter-

national trade through Armenian territory while explicitly safeguarding Armenia's territorial integrity and legal jurisdiction. By embedding American and European capital directly into the physical geography of Syunik, Armenia has successfully linked its survival to the stability of global supply chains. In this "Connectivity as Security" model, the presence of US strategic economic interests serves as a major deterrent against military incursion.

Conclusion

The Kremlin's neo-imperial rhetoric and its overt disregard for Ukrainian sovereignty have catalyzed an active decolonial turn in regional political thought. For the first time in the post-Soviet era, the pursuit of strategic autonomy is being framed not merely as a pragmatic policy choice, but as a moral and existential necessity to protect national identity from a resurgent imperial center. This ideological decoupling is further complicated by the 'human windfall' of 2022–2025: the relocation of thousands of Russian IT professionals and entrepreneurs to hubs like Yerevan.

The geopolitical and economic recalibration of the South Caucasus between 2022 and 2026 demonstrates that while international sanctions have created a short-term economic glue through forced regional trade hubs, they have simultaneously functioned as a solvent for Russia's long-term soft power and security guarantees. For regional actors such as Armenia, the increased trade volume with Moscow, driven by sanctions circumvention, is increasingly perceived as a short-term survival strategy rather than a stable strategic alignment. The erosion of trust in the traditional hegemonic center has facilitated the emergence of hedging strategies, through which regional states leverage the economic advantages of intermediary positions to reduce dependence on Russia's security and technological orbit progressively.

The study shows that sanctions can generate a paradoxical dynamic beyond the target: they may reshape regional orders not only through their impact on target states but also by transforming the security calculations of intermediary states. The Armenian case suggests that under conditions of declining patron-state reliability, security considerations can override the political effects of economic interdependence, producing strategic divergence rather than alignment.

Crucially, the weakening of Russia's traditional influence has not resulted in a proportional or automatic expansion of Western hegemony. Instead, a complex "Middle Ground" has emerged, defined by the unprecedented strategic importance of the Middle Corridor. In this environment of protracted war and economic warfare, energy and transport infrastructures linking Asia with Europe have become

the primary arena of competition for both Russia and the West. This “Connectivity Competition” has allowed states in the South Caucasus to leverage their geographical position to secure competing guarantees. Consequently, the region’s future is no longer anchored in a singular alliance, but in its role as a vital, multimodal bridge where the “Sovereignty-Connectivity” nexus serves as the ultimate deterrent against regional escalation.

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Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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RETHINKING UKRAINE'S GEOPOLITICS: THE FAILURE OF INTER-MEDIATION AND THE ORIGINS OF WAR

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Abstract

The Russia–Ukraine war stands as one of the most consequential geopolitical conflicts of the 21st century, raising fundamental questions about the relationship between geography, power, and conflict in the post–Cold War international order. Tensions between Russia and Western powers have intensified during the conflict, and more than three years after the outbreak of the war, its outcome remains uncertain. The paper analyzes Ukraine's geopolitical position as a key factor shaping the origins and dynamics of the ongoing war. Particular attention is given to Ukraine's evolving relations with Russia and with Western actors, primarily the United States and the European Union. Ukraine has long occupied a central place not only in Russia's geopolitical and geostrategic designs, but also in Russian history and identity. Yet after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine began to develop closer political and economic ties with Western institutions, following a trajectory similar to that of several former Eastern Bloc states. This article argues that Ukraine's geopolitical position is best understood not as a buffer, but as a failed intermediary space, in which competing integration projects (Euro-Atlantic and Russian) have eroded the conditions necessary for neutrality, transforming structural in-betweenness into a catalyst for war.

Keywords: *Russia–Ukraine war, Ukraine, geopolitics, post-Soviet transition, buffer state, bridge state.*

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Introduction

The war in Ukraine emerged not from its role as a buffer, but from the collapse of its intermediary position between rival geopolitical orders, which transformed structural in-betweenness into a driver of conflict. A state's geopolitical status—and its capacity to shape world politics—is largely determined by its geographical location, available resources, historical legacy, and political structures. While some countries successfully leverage these elements to exert global influence, others face structural constraints that limit their agency and often leave them vulnerable to historical and contemporary conflicts. By examining Ukraine's geopolitical status, this paper seeks to explain the geopolitical factors that contributed to the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war.

The complex historical development of Ukraine is briefly introduced to trace the evolution of its geopolitical status. The latter has changed dramatically in the last few decades, particularly since Ukraine gained independence in 1991. Both its territorial configuration and demographic composition have undergone significant changes, and Ukraine has slowly become a buffer state between the West and the East. Alongside this characterization,¹ alternative interpretations of Ukraine's geopolitical role will also be discussed, as the country's geographical position allows for multiple categorizations. Ukraine's position between the East and the West has created a persistent strategic dilemma, as closer alignment with one side often risks antagonizing the other. The paper argues that Ukraine's geopolitical position did not merely render it a passive “buffer state,” but structurally embedded it in a persistent security dilemma between Russia and the West, in which geographical exposure amplified mutual threat perceptions and made conflict escalation increasingly likely after 2014. While classical geopolitical theories correctly identify Ukraine's strategic centrality, they fail to explain the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war. This article argues that geography alone is insufficient and that conflict emerged from the interaction between structural positioning and incompatible political integration projects that eliminated the viability of neutrality. The article concludes by outlining several possible scenarios regarding Ukraine's postwar status. Although the end of the war remains uncertain, Ukraine's evolving geopolitical status will play a crucial role in shaping the future dynamics of Eurasian geopolitics.

¹ Krisztián Jójárt, “Russia's Security Perception of NATO,” in *NATO Today*, ed. Zoltán Szenes (Budapest: Zrínyi, 2021), 78–80, in Hungarian: [Jójárt Krisztián, „Oroszország biztonsági percepciója a NATO-ról,” in *A mai NATO*, szerk. Szenes Zoltán (Budapest: Zrínyi Kiadó, 2021), 78–80.]

By reconceptualizing Ukraine as a failed intermediary space rather than a stable buffer, this article seeks to contribute to broader debates on geopolitics and international conflict. It highlights the limits of traditional spatial categories and underscores the need to account for the dynamic interaction between geography, power, and political choice in explaining contemporary wars.

Historical Evolution of Ukraine's Geopolitical Position

Ukraine's territorial and political configuration has undergone numerous transformations throughout its history, culminating in the establishment of an independent state in 1991. For the purposes of this analysis, the key developments in Ukrainian history are divided into three broad stages in relation to the country's relationship with the Soviet Union: the pre-Soviet era, the period during which Ukraine functioned as a republic of the Soviet Union, and the post-Soviet era. The existing literature generally identifies the Soviet period as one of the most decisive phases in Ukraine's historical development. Consequently, the country's political and geopolitical evolution can reasonably be examined with particular attention to this era. While this study acknowledges the most important developments of earlier historical stages, its primary focus lies on the decades surrounding the Soviet period.

Pre-Soviet era: Many of the most significant territorial and political changes took place during this period. Kyivan (Kievan) Rus, often regarded as the first East Slavic state and as a historical predecessor of several East Slavic polities, played a significant role in the region's cultural, political, and national development. In the following few centuries, Ukrainian territories were divided among several political powers, including Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Moldova (Moldavia), the Mongols, the Ottoman Empire, and the Cossacks. On the one hand, Ukrainians were influenced by European ideas; on the other hand, they struggled to consolidate their national identity. Elements of this historical duality continue to shape Ukrainian identity even today.

The Cossack period was another decisive phase in Ukrainian history. During the seventeenth century, this community contributed significantly to the Ukrainian nation-building process, helping lay the foundations of modern Ukraine. Later, in the nineteenth century, Ukrainian territories were incorporated into the Habsburg and Romanov Empires, which, rather than holding back Ukrainian development, contributed to processes of cultural and national revival. At this time, efforts were made to preserve elements of Ukrainian cultural heritage, while the political, so-

cial, and economic spheres underwent modernization.² By the end of the eighteenth century, the Russian Empire had become the dominant power in the region following the annexation of Crimea and southern Ukrainian territories. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ukraine's vast steppe regions and fertile black-earth soils made the country a popular destination for peasant migration. Heavy industrialization also started during this period, resulting in waves of urbanization. The country became an industrial and agricultural powerhouse, and in many major cities, Russians constituted a significant share of the population.

Ukraine had an ethnically and religiously diverse population. From the early twentieth century onward, especially after the founding of the first Ukrainian political party, the principal political goal became independence. The opportunity to pursue this goal emerged after World War I. In 1917, the Ukrainian People's Republic was proclaimed within a federated Russian state, and full independence was declared in January 1918. The war left Ukraine with a declining economy, diminished population, and the unresolved question of nationalities. The collapse of European empires created an opportunity for Ukraine to emerge as an independent political actor in Europe and pursue the clear goal of independence.³ In 1919, most of Ukraine's territory became part of the Ukrainian SSR, which became a constituent republic of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1922.⁴

Soviet era: During the Soviet period, territorial changes were less extensive than in the previous period, although in the middle of the twentieth century, the last major territorial realignment of Soviet Ukraine took place. After World War II, Soviet Ukraine incorporated territories that had previously belonged to Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia, completing the modern territorial configuration of the republic. The process was finalized in 1954, when the Soviet leadership transferred the Crimean Peninsula from the Russian SFSR to the Ukrainian SSR.⁵

Despite some opportunities for development, such as expanded access to higher education and economic growth, Soviet rule imposed severe political, social, and economic constraints on Ukraine. This country historically possessed a strong agricultural base and was often referred to as the "breadbasket of Europe,"

² Valerii Smoly, "Specific Features of Historical Evolution," in *Ukraine in Maps*, ed. Károly Kocsis, Leonid Rudenko, and Ferenc Schweitzer (Budapest: Geographical Institute, 2008), 19–24, https://hungarian-geography.hu/konyvtar/Ukraine/Ukraine_in_maps_Specific_features_of_historical_evolution.pdf.

³ Serhii Plokhyy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 60–226.

⁴ EmperorTigerstar, "The History of Ukraine: Every Year," YouTube video, April 24, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-b5w5qc_VY.

⁵ Plokhyy, *Gates of Europe*, 298.

but during the Soviet era, agriculture was increasingly subordinated to heavy industrialization. The country underwent a remarkable industrial development, but, as in other communist states, this process hindered the agricultural sector. Forced collectivization, grain requisitioning, and broader Soviet policies contributed to the famine of 1932–1933, known as the Holodomor. This tragedy was accompanied by widespread repression and persecution.⁶

Ukraine was also one of the major sites of the Holocaust, during which at least 1.5 million Jews were killed on its territory. After Stalin died in 1953, de-Stalinization created somewhat greater space for cultural expression and limited forms of national revival in Soviet Ukraine. Nevertheless, Soviet Ukraine continued to face difficulties like Russification or Sovietization, economic deterioration, decline of industrial and agricultural production, and even a nuclear accident in 1986. By the end of this era, under Gorbachev's rule, a new opportunity for national revival had emerged. After Gorbachev's reforms, Ukraine prioritized the defense of national culture and language.⁷ This process contributed to the declaration of state sovereignty in 1990. It ultimately resulted in the confirmation of full independence by referendum in 1991.⁸

Post-Soviet era: After finally gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine continued to face serious political, economic, and institutional challenges. Independence created an opportunity for Ukraine to define its own political course, but this process proved costly and difficult. The state had a great opportunity for development, but consolidating democracy and building a resilient state apparatus proved challenging. Internal power struggles and the growing influence of regional elites in politics gradually consolidated the oligarchic nature of Ukraine's political system. Democratic deficits, rule-of-law problems, and economic difficulties hindered state development. At different times, the political leadership pursued either a pro-European or a pro-Russian orientation, making consistent state development difficult.

During the 1990s, Ukraine took steps towards the West. It joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, signed a cooperation agreement with the European Union (EU), and joined the Partnership for Peace program organized by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).⁹ Closer alignment with Russia lacked broad support in Ukrainian society, and this discontent was expressed during the revolutions

⁶ Oksana Vynnyk, "Professional Ethics, Medical Experts and the Famine of 1932–1933 in Soviet Ukraine," *Journal of Genocide Research* 26, no. 3 (2024): 265.

⁷ Plokyh, *Gates of Europe*, 245–325.

⁸ Laura Blaj, "Ukraine's Independence and Its Geostrategic Impact in Eastern Europe," *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 21, no. 2–3 (2013): 165–81.

⁹ Plokyh, *Gates of Europe*, 325–28.

in 2004 and 2014. These events served as catalysts for democratic transformation, and since 2014, Ukraine has been committed to European integration. This foreign policy orientation was viewed negatively by Russia, which annexed Crimea in 2014 and launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.¹⁰

This summary highlights that large parts of present-day Ukraine were under foreign rule for extended periods and were inhabited by diverse ethnic communities. Russian influence remained significant in the region, including through sizable Russian-speaking populations, particularly in eastern and southern Ukraine. These factors contributed to long-term tensions in the region, which eventually culminated in the armed conflict that continues today. In the next section, the importance and geopolitical background of these territories are examined to explore why these territories have become objects of intense geopolitical contestation.

Geographical Reasons: Country in the Pivot

Ukraine's troubled history and nation-building process can be explained in large part by geographical and geopolitical factors. Being situated essentially in the center of Eurasia with access to the Black Sea, the country holds a special geostrategic position. This means that it is situated at the crossroads of economic and commercial arteries between East and West, North and South. Because of its strategically valuable position, Ukraine repeatedly became an object of geopolitical competition among neighboring powers. Although Ukraine repeatedly resisted external domination and developed its own political and national traditions, it often remained vulnerable to the power struggles of larger states.¹¹

To clarify the analytical framework of this study, it is necessary to introduce the foundations of geopolitical thought. The most significant theories of geopolitics were developed more than a hundred years ago, but they are still relevant today.

Friedrich Ratzel's *Lebensraum* theory¹² helps explain the great powers' interest in the territory of Ukraine. He associated the state with a living creature that needs to possess essential territories. Ratzel considered the annexation of smaller and weaker states by greater powers a natural process. According to Rudolf Kjellén, another influential geopolitical thinker associated with organic theories of the state, conflicts of interest between great powers tend to intensify into open confron-

¹⁰ Daria Synhaievskia, "Ukraine's Political Transformation: A Journey from Independence to the Present Day," *UkraineWorld*, 2024, <https://ukraineworld.org/en/articles/analysis/ukraines-political-transformation>.

¹¹ Smoly, "Specific Features of Historical Evolution," 19–24.

¹² Athanasios Stogiannos, *The Genesis of Geopolitics and Friedrich Ratzel: Dismissing the Myth of the Ratzelian Geodeterminism* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 57–65.

tation.¹³ From this perspective, the conflict in Ukraine reflects a geopolitical struggle between Russia and the West, with Ukraine positioned as a frontier between competing spheres of influence.

Alfred Thayer Mahan developed a framework identifying the criteria that a state should fulfil to become a world power. These criteria include geographical location, physical structure, territorial extent, population size, national character, and governmental and institutional characteristics. Mahan attached importance to a state's access to the sea and whether it is able to become a sea power. He emphasized that favorable geographical conditions alone are insufficient; a state also requires durable political and institutional capacity to become a major power.¹⁴

This point is also relevant to Ukraine, which possesses favorable geographical conditions, but has always lacked a proper and stable political order. Frequent political alterations, which were often accompanied by a foreign power's influence, did not allow space for the stabilization of the country's political system, especially of democracy. In terms of size and demographic potential, Ukraine ranks among the most important states in Europe. Its territory exceeds 600,000 square kilometers, and even with losing control over some of its Eastern and Southern regions, it remains one of the largest countries in Europe. Population data are more difficult to assess with precision, particularly while the war is ongoing. Before the outbreak of the war, around 44 million people lived in Ukraine; in 2025, its population is estimated to be around 35 million. Although the long-term demographic consequences of the war remain uncertain, Ukraine remains one of the largest states in Europe in territorial and strategic terms.¹⁵

Halford Mackinder's framework is also useful for understanding Ukraine's geographical and strategic position. He divided the world into three areas: the Heartland, the pivot area of northeastern and central Eurasia; the inner crescent, comprising the remaining Eurasian and North African territories; and the outer crescent, consisting of all remaining oceanic countries. In Mackinder's view, Eastern Europe is the key region whose buffer zones served as a geopolitical gateway between East and West. It is important, in his view, to maintain the balance of power, which can easily be disrupted if one power wishes to extend its influence.

¹³ Péter Klemensits, "The Role of Eurasia in Classical Geopolitical Theories," Eurasia Center, March 4, 2021, <https://eurasiacenter.hu/2021/02/17/eurazia-szerepe-a-klasszikus-geopolitikai-elmeletekben/>, in Hungarian: [Péter Klemensits, "Eurázsia szerepe a klasszikus geopolitikai elméletekben," Eurázsia Központ, March 4, 2021, <https://eurasiacenter.hu/2021/02/17/eurazia-szerepe-a-klasszikus-geopolitikai-elmeletekben/>].

¹⁴ Klemensits, "Role of Eurasia."

¹⁵ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Population Prospects 2024: Summary of Results* (New York: United Nations, 2024), 56, https://population.un.org/wpp/assets/Files/WPP2024_Summary-of-Results.pdf.

Even though only a small part of Ukraine falls within Mackinder's Heartland, influence over Ukraine remains strategically important for the major powers. Ukraine possesses substantial economic and demographic potential. Control over its territory would provide access to the Black Sea, fertile agricultural land, substantial natural and industrial resources, and important human and military assets.¹⁶ If the war ends with a peace treaty drawing new borderlines alongside the current front lines, Russia would retain substantial strategic, economic, and military advantages. By annexing Crimea, it secured control over access to the Black Sea and an important naval base in Sevastopol.¹⁷ Furthermore, control over occupied Ukrainian territories would provide Russia with access to valuable mineral resources, industrial assets, and fertile agricultural land.

Karl Haushofer proposed another way of conceptualizing the world through his theory of pan-regions. In this model, each region was to be organized around a dominant state possessing sufficient *Lebensraum*, resources, population, and access to the sea. The regions were Pan-America, led by the United States; Pan-Europe or Eurafrika, led by Germany; Pan-Russia, led by Russia; and Pan-Asia, led by Japan. Haushofer also suggested that satellite states should be located on the peripheries of these regions.¹⁸ Although this theory belongs to an earlier geopolitical era, its regional logic remains analytically relevant, even if the dominant powers identified by Haushofer have changed. A broad East–West division remains visible today, with Russia and the US acting as key competing powers. At the same time, Ukraine occupies a precarious position on the boundary between rival geopolitical spaces.

Nicholas J. Spykman's theory is also relevant, as he revised several of the assumptions advanced by earlier geopolitical thinkers.¹⁹ He developed his own geopolitical interpretation of the world map, drawing in part on Mackinder's Heartland theory. Like Mackinder, Spykman referred to the pivot area as the Heartland, a Central Eurasian region dominated by Russia, extending into parts of Ukraine.

In Spykman's framework, influence over the Rimland, the zone between central Eurasia and the surrounding oceans, represents the principal strategic objective of great powers.²⁰ States situated in this area are commonly regarded as buffer

¹⁶ H. J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904): 421–37.

¹⁷ István Szilágyi, "Russian Geopolitical Thinking: An Overview," *Geopolitikai Szemle* 1, no. 1 (2019): 9–39, in Hungarian: [István Szilágyi, "Az orosz geopolitikai gondolkodás: Áttekintés," *Geopolitikai Szemle* 1, no. 1 (2019): 9–39].

¹⁸ Karl Haushofer, *Geopolitics of the Pan-Ideas* (Berlin: Zentral-Verlag, 1931), 7–26, in German: [Karl Haushofer, *Geopolitik der Pan-Ideen* (Berlin: Zentral-Verlag, 1931), 7–26].

¹⁹ Nicholas John Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944), 35–41.

²⁰ Klemensits, "Role of Eurasia."

states between land and sea powers. From this perspective, Ukraine occupies a frontier position between the Heartland and the peripheral regions. This geopolitical location, coupled with internal instability, created favorable conditions for external power rivalry and further intensified the country's internal instability.

Zbigniew Brzezinski also emphasized Ukraine's strategic importance in his analysis of Eurasian geopolitics. He regarded Eurasia as the central geopolitical arena and argued that losing Ukraine would severely constrain Russia's geopolitical reach. Without Ukraine, any attempt to rebuild an empire and rule Eurasia would lead to Russia's isolation. Even if Russia regarded Ukraine as a country of its 'near abroad,' it lacked the political and economic power to influence its neighboring countries. Russian pressure on these states often encouraged them to seek alternative partners, particularly in the West. According to Brzezinski, Ukraine has a decisive role in the relationship between Russia and Europe. In this view, if Ukraine is to preserve its independence, it should be a part of the European community. Ukrainian membership in the EU or NATO would be deeply problematic from Russia's perspective while simultaneously implying closer political and institutional integration with Europe.²¹ Under such conditions, Ukraine could in principle function as a bridge between East and West, although this prospect appears highly remote under present circumstances.

What these theories share is their emphasis on the geopolitical importance of Eurasia and on the role of surrounding powers in balancing influence over its central spaces. The balance between these powers is quite fragile; if any of them attempts to extend its territory or influence, the clash of interests can easily lead to war. A similar geopolitical logic can be observed in the Russia-Ukraine war. Western actors, corresponding broadly to the peripheral and Rimland powers described in classical geopolitics, supported Ukraine's movement toward European integration, a development that conflicted with Russian interests. Ukraine's prolonged position between these competing orientations intensified geopolitical tensions and contributed to the outbreak of war.

Ukraine Between East and West: Competing Models of Statehood

Ukraine has pursued nearly every major orientation in its foreign relations, yet none of them has proved to be fully successful. At different times, the country was led by pro-Russian elites, pursued neutrality, or favored Euro-Atlantic integration. Ukraine's position should not be reduced to indecision, since at each stage one major external actor remained dissatisfied with the country's chosen direction. Con-

²¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 87–123.

stant pressure from both East and West, combined with attempts to maneuver between them, left Ukraine with limited room for autonomous state-building and the full consolidation of sovereignty. As the historical overview suggests, Ukraine's political and diplomatic objectives were changing over time. This section examines how Ukraine got into this situation and how maneuvering worked in practice.

For historical reasons mentioned above, Russia regards Ukraine as a country belonging to its 'near abroad,' which means that it occupies a prominent place in Russia's sphere of influence. With the emergence and gradual expansion of the European Union, Ukraine also came to occupy an increasingly important place in the West's strategic horizon, finding itself on the frontier between the two sides. For a while, Ukraine tried to pursue a balanced foreign policy, but without a stable internal foundation, such a strategy has not proved successful in the long term.²² The unresolved question of Ukraine's geopolitical alignment caused tension and a security dilemma, which is one of the *casus belli* of the ongoing war. Beyond the clash between Russian and Ukrainian nationalisms, the broader conflict of interests between East and West also contributed to the escalation of the crisis.

There are competing interpretations of the war's underlying causes. While the West blames Russian imperial ambitions, Russia explains its attack by portraying NATO's further eastern expansion as an existential threat. Enhancing security has always been the key objective of joining a military alliance, but for states like Ukraine, it may have led to a completely different effect. Instead of increasing security, it can heighten the risk of war, as the Ukrainian case illustrates.²³ Tensions surrounding NATO enlargement had been building since the 1990s. From the Russian perspective, Western support for Ukraine appeared to signal an effort to consolidate influence on Russia's border. Later, Putin viewed the 2008 promise of eventual NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine as a direct threat, a perception that contributed to rising tensions and later crises in the post-Soviet space, including the annexation of Crimea. John J. Mearsheimer suggested in his 2014 work that the West should stop westernizing Ukraine and instead seek to preserve it as a

²² Rita Fekete, "What Is the Geopolitical Cause of the Russia-Ukraine War? – Ágnes Bernek," YouTube video, July 20, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3gF66_h7y4, in Hungarian: [Rita Fekete, "Mi az orosz-ukrán háború geopolitikai oka? - Bernek Ágnes," YouTube video, July 20, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3gF66_h7y4].

²³ Gergely Varga, "The Geopolitics and Tragedy of the War in Ukraine," Danube Institute, January 2025, 2–5, <https://danubeinstitute.hu/hu/kutatas/the-geopolitics-and-tragedy-of-the-war-in-ukraine>.

neutral buffer.²⁴ This is only one of several categorizations that have been applied to Ukraine in an attempt to describe its geopolitical status.

One frequently cited, though debated, claim is that Ukraine's name means "borderland." In addition, there are many different ways to describe the form of this country, some suggesting that Ukraine lacks sovereignty and more or less depends on another entity, while others highlight the country's role as a frontier. Historical experience suggests that Ukraine has repeatedly been interpreted through such classifications, and sooner or later, it must find one with which it can identify to achieve long-lasting peace.

The first category to consider is that of the *satellite state*,²⁵ in which a nation is independent but heavily influenced or even controlled by a more powerful country in political, economic, and military terms. Haushofer also mentioned this type of state in his theory. He argued that great powers of the pan-regions are surrounded by satellite states on the periphery. This form of state typically exists in the context of larger empires or spheres of influence where the dominant power limits the satellite's autonomy. In Ukraine's case, this role can be traced back to the period after World War I, when Bolshevik power, with the support of local communists, incorporated Soviet Ukraine into a broader system dominated by Moscow.²⁶ This dynamic characterized their relationship during the Cold War, and in the event of a Russian victory in the ongoing war, Ukraine could once again be reduced to this status.

After analyzing Ukraine's history, geopolitical status, and relationships, there is another suitable and often used term for determining the country's status, which is the form of a *buffer state*. Such a state is formally independent, influenced but not fully controlled by any of the powers between which it is situated. It maintains workable relations with both parties, as Ukraine has tried to do for years. This type was also mentioned earlier by Mackinder, who considered states of Eastern Europe as buffer states between East and West, forming a geopolitical gateway. This status derives from the country's geopolitical position and can be maintained in the long term if the surrounding great powers can reconcile their interests.

²⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014): 77–89, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24483306>.

²⁵ "Satellite States - (Honors World History) - Vocab, Definition, Explanations," Fiveable, <https://library.fiveable.me/key-terms/hs-honors-world-history/satellite-states>.

²⁶ Stephan Rindlisbacher, "The Territory of Ukraine and Its History," in *Ukraine's Many Faces: Land, People, and Culture Revisited*, ed. Olena Palko and Manuel F  rez Gil (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2023), 165–74, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839466643-019>.

When Ukraine abandoned its balancing policy and committed itself to Euro-Atlantic integration, Russia felt threatened and sought to pull the country back into its orbit through force.²⁷ Internal divisions within the country often reinforce its buffer-state condition. In Ukraine's case, this means a division between pro-Russian and pro-European orientations. Ethnic and religious divisions are also visible, as they cause constant tension. Without a stable base, there is a higher chance for foreign influence, and in Ukraine's case, it means getting stuck between two powerful entities' spheres of interest. If Ukraine succeeds in building a strong economy and a stable political and social order, it may eventually move beyond this status and instead become a link between East and West.²⁸

A milder variation of the buffer-state concept is the notion of the frontier state. As noted earlier, Ukraine is on the edge of competing spheres of influence, which allows it to be called a frontier. After the end of the war, this status is unlikely to change. Whichever side it moves closer to, the country is likely to retain this role as the frontier of the broader alignment it joins.²⁹

In 2014, Henry Kissinger proposed what might be considered an ideal role for Ukraine, arguing that its future should not be determined by exclusive alignment with either East or West. It must not be either side's outpost against the other, but rather function as a bridge between them. For this, a real agreement needs to be reached between East and West. With such cooperation, Ukraine could reemerge as an important connecting space in world politics and the global economy at a key Eurasian crossroads. From this perspective, Russia should stop pushing Ukraine back into a satellite status and let it find its own place in world politics. Meanwhile, the West should recognize that from Russia's perspective, Ukraine has never been viewed as merely a foreign country, since Ukraine was an integral part of Russian history and, indeed, Russia.³⁰

The mentioned forms of state can help clarify Ukraine's situation. These categories range from the least to the most favorable scenario, and because the outcome of the war remains uncertain, Ukraine may yet move toward any of them, with major consequences for its future geopolitical status.

²⁷ Sven Biscop, "From Buffer to Frontier: Ukraine and the EU," Egmont Policy Brief 298 (February 2023): 1–2, https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2023/02/Sven-Biscop_Policy_Brief_298.pdf.

²⁸ Fekete, "What Is the Geopolitical Cause."

²⁹ Biscop, "From Buffer to Frontier," 2.

³⁰ Henry A. Kissinger, "How the Ukraine Crisis Ends," *Washington Post*, March 5, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-to-settle-the-ukraine-crisis-start-at-the-end/2014/03/05/46dad868-a496-11e3-8466-d34c451760b9_story.html.

Possible Scenarios for Ukraine's Geopolitical Status

Although geopolitical transformations may appear less dynamic than in earlier decades, several territories remain in contested or uncertain status, including parts of Ukraine. As discussed above, Ukraine was unable to consolidate its independence for long, as both internal and external power struggles soon reemerged. The fact that the country's geopolitical position will remain significant is unlikely to change, although its future role and status remain uncertain. This section outlines three possible scenarios, supported by comparative examples, in order to illustrate the potential paths Ukraine may take.

NATO membership: One of Ukraine's main goals is membership in the Euro-Atlantic military alliance, which would provide security guarantees under Article 5. Although the country's movement toward NATO is often treated by Russia as a major cause of conflict, membership could nonetheless be presented as a long-term solution to the war. This contingency can be compared to the situation of reunified Germany, when in 1990 the former German Democratic Republic became a member of the alliance after unification. That settlement was embedded in a broader security framework negotiated among the major powers, rather than in a context of ongoing war.

In Ukraine's case, a comparable arrangement would require credible and mutually accepted security guarantees. After the war ends, Ukrainians will surely be weakened and traumatized, but many will retain combat experience, access to weapons, and strong motivations shaped by the violence of the conflict. Therefore, Russia could be a target of sabotage, guerrilla warfare, and cyberattacks, which could be avoided with robust postwar security arrangements. Without acceptable security guarantees, Russia is unlikely to accept Ukraine's NATO membership, which is necessary to avoid future confrontation between NATO and Russia or Russia and Ukraine. Currently, Russia's demands include restrictions on foreign troop deployments and limits on the arming of Ukraine. Reunified Germany was in a better position in 1990 because it was not part of an ongoing conflict and its borders were settled. For Ukraine, any path toward NATO membership would require far clearer territorial and security conditions.³¹ Ukraine's accession to NATO could also generate tension among current member states because of burden sharing. In this case, an alternative arrangement could involve bilateral or multilateral security agreements with countries willing to assist Ukraine in the event of renewed conflict. The final settlement on Germany in 1990 fixed its borders and created a nego-

³¹ Eric Ciaramella and Eric Green, "Ukraine, NATO, and War Termination," Council on Foreign Relations, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/report/ukraine-nato-and-war-termination>.

tiated international framework for its status, which makes the comparison to Ukraine imperfect.

Neutrality, non-bloc status: After Ukraine's independence, neutrality was on the table for a short period of time, but power struggles gradually pushed Kyiv to swing between East and West, creating a security vacuum. The war has already had serious consequences for Ukraine; after a ceasefire or peace agreement, it will not be able to carry out reconstruction on its own. Neutrality may serve as an intermediate arrangement for the country before it commits itself permanently to one side, in light of the end of the war. For many years, Finland was treated as the classic model of neutrality, having maintained its independence and sovereignty while becoming a widely admired society in the eyes of the international community.³² After the escalation in 2014, Brzezinski proposed the Finnish model for Ukraine. In his opinion, a form of Finlandization would have been the most acceptable compromise for all parties. The model presupposes stable neighborly relations, prosperous economic cooperation with both Russia and the EU, refusal to join military alliances viewed as threatening by Russia, and closer cooperation with Europe in non-military spheres.³³ Although Finland abandoned its long-standing non-alignment by joining NATO in 2023, the so-called Finlandization can still serve as an example for a potential postwar status. In 1948, Finland signed a treaty with the Soviet Union under which it retained sovereignty while remaining outside hostile military blocs (NATO or the Warsaw Pact). In practice, however, the Soviet Union continued to exercise significant influence over the country during the Cold War. Even so, Finland was able to achieve a high level of political and economic development.³⁴

Ukraine is in a far more complex situation now than Finland was during the Cold War. This model may sound highly idealized in light of Ukraine's current condition; nevertheless, seeking the role of a neutral buffer may still serve as a possible strategic objective. The scenario of neutrality could be implemented through the United Nations (UN), where most of the interested parties could participate in shaping a final agreement regarding Ukraine's status.

Russian influence: In this case, Russia would have to achieve a breakthrough at the front lines, seize more Ukrainian territories, and cause serious damage to the

³² Eugene Rumer, "Neutrality: An Alternative to Ukraine's Membership in NATO," Council on Foreign Relations, January 7, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/article/neutrality-alternative-ukraines-membership-nato>.

³³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Russia Needs to Be Offered a 'Finland Option' for Ukraine," *Financial Times*, February 23, 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/e855408c-9bf6-11e3-afe3-00144feab7de>.

³⁴ The Economist, "What Is 'Finlandisation'?" *The Economist*, February 11, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/02/11/what-is-finlandisation>.

country, forcing it to capitulate. If Ukraine were to surrender, Russia would effectively dictate the terms of peace. Some experts compare this scenario to Georgia, whose recent political trajectory has involved a relative distancing from the EU alongside a more accommodating posture toward Russia. This would likely mean the effective closure of Ukraine's EU accession path and probably the suspension of American and EU financial support. However, without firm integration into Western security and political structures, and while falling into Russia's shadow, Ukraine would face the risk of slowly drifting into a geopolitical gray zone. The war could thus end in a coercive or unstable settlement that weakens Ukraine's Western integration over time.³⁵

To gain a clearer sense of which scenario is more likely to occur, it is necessary to consider recent developments and the current positions of the parties involved. Taking these into account, each side has red lines and remains unwilling to compromise on them. The most divisive issues in any possible agreement are likely to be territorial changes and postwar security guarantees. These questions will almost certainly reshape broader geopolitical dynamics and affect the international community as a whole. On these issues, the red lines of the parties sharply conflict, and a workable compromise remains difficult to envisage for now. Despite the leaders' recently expressed willingness to cooperate, each side continues to advance its own vision of peace and a set of conditions it is not prepared to abandon. Russia, above all, seeks international legal recognition of its control over the occupied regions and their incorporation into the Russian Federation. Regarding security guarantees, Russia demands the demilitarization of Ukraine and formal assurances that the country will neither possess nor host nuclear weapons or related technology. Ukrainian NATO membership is also unacceptable to the Russian side, although Moscow has generally shown less hostility to Ukraine's EU accession. The Kremlin explains this by pointing to the different functions of the two organizations. It presents the EU primarily as an economic integration project and has stated that Ukraine has the sovereign right to pursue accession. In the long term, some Russian reasoning even suggests that Ukraine's EU membership could be useful if it were to contribute to internal strains within the Union. By contrast, join-

³⁵ JPMorganChase Center for Geopolitics, "The Russia-Ukraine Endgame and the Future of Europe," May 2025, 1–6, <https://www.jpmorganchase.com/content/dam/jpmorganchase/documents/center-for-geopolitics/jpmc-cfg-russia-ukraine.pdf>.

ing a military alliance is treated by Moscow as a direct security issue, which is why it continues to reject Ukrainian membership in NATO.³⁶

On the other hand, Ukraine is unwilling to surrender sovereign territory. During the latest international summits, some flexibility appeared regarding territorial questions, and Ukraine may be willing to concede some land in exchange for a credible peace settlement. However, for this to happen, Russia and the international community would have to present terms that Ukraine could regard as acceptable. Ukraine considers NATO membership and EU accession as key security guarantees, which currently seem uncertain. Paradoxically, the loss of eastern territory might ease certain burdens of postwar reconstruction. This would cut Kyiv off from a costly insurgency in the Donbas and allow reconstruction to focus on more governable, less damaged regions requiring lower public spending.³⁷

Since the US President Donald Trump assumed the role of mediator between the warring parties, his opinion may carry considerable weight during later negotiations. Trump stated that a possible exchange of territory needs to be discussed and declared on social media that he opposes Ukraine's NATO membership, and suggested that Crimea would remain under Russian control after the war. He suggested that security guarantees should not come from NATO but from direct involvement of the US and European countries, especially the coalition of the willing.³⁸ At present, this idea appears to be one of the more workable options, provided that Ukraine accepts it as a credible guarantee.

The scenarios and examples mentioned above can only serve as a general guide for Ukraine. It cannot implement the same policies since each country has unique conditions and a distinct security environment, determined by history, size, demographic composition, geography, and politics. The examples provide the opportunity to analyze best practices and achieve an outcome that is most suitable for Ukraine. The country's leadership must keep both favorable and less favorable scenarios in mind, as harmonizing all the notions of the warring states and their supporters will be a real challenge. Either way, Ukraine's geopolitical status will undergo a significant change depending on which configuration is ultimately implemented.

³⁶ Reuters, "Kremlin Says Joining the EU Is Ukraine's Sovereign Right," February 18, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kremlin-says-joining-eu-is-ukraines-sovereign-right-2025-02-18/>.

³⁷ Kutcher, "The Russo-Ukrainian War and Mackinder's Heartland Thesis," 2024.

³⁸ The Washington Post, "Here's what Russia and Ukraine have demanded to end the war," August 24, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/08/19/russia-ukraine-peace-deal-trump-putin-zelensky/>.

Conclusion

As the preceding analysis has shown, the causes of Ukraine's difficult historical trajectory and the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war can be traced to a range of interrelated factors. The country is divided in multiple ways—ethnically, religiously, demographically, and politically—which has generated internal tensions and created obstacles to nation-building. The confusing and constantly changing circumstances made it extremely difficult for the Ukrainian nation to develop and find its own voice. Due to external power struggles, the country was often unable to consolidate its sovereignty and assert its will. At nearly every stage of its modern history, Ukraine faced the competing ambitions of multiple external powers, and this pattern continues to shape the present. Ukraine may not be able to escape it, as larger political entities will always seek to possess or gain influence over its territory. While geopolitical theories identify Ukraine's strategic centrality, they do not explain the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war, as the conflict emerged from the interaction between structural positioning and incompatible political integration projects that rendered neutrality infeasible.

What emerges most clearly from this analysis is that Ukraine's geopolitical vulnerability is not the product of a single crisis or decision, but the result of a long historical accumulation of structural constraints. Its position between rival centers of power, combined with internal fragmentation and unresolved questions of identity, has repeatedly limited its room for autonomous action. For this reason, Ukraine's predicament should not be understood only through the immediate logic of war, but also through the broader geopolitical and historical patterns that have shaped the state's development since independence.

During the last century's geopolitical transformation, alliances seem to be solidifying. After a while, the constant expansion of the EU and NATO reached Ukraine's doorstep, while Russia was always in its backyard. The spheres of interest of East and West collided on Ukraine's soil, and the state was wedged in between the two parties. The ongoing war highlights that Ukraine can hardly escape its geopolitically unfavorable situation. The forms of state discussed above illustrate the range of roles Ukraine might play in international politics, from serving as a satellite of another power to functioning as a bridge between East and West. The latter would offer a significant opportunity for development, but without the country's reconstruction and the establishment of stable domestic political conditions, Ukraine cannot realistically assume such a role.

The scenarios bring us closer to the image of postwar conditions, which depends on a proper agreement with security guarantees. The final peace treaty will

shape Ukraine's future and geopolitical status, with significant implications for world politics.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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THE “NEW YALTA” FRAMEWORK: GREAT-POWER BARGAINING IN THE RUSSIA–UKRAINE WAR AND THE TRANSACTIONAL GEOPOLITICS

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Abstract

This article critically examines the structural transformation of the transatlantic security architecture and the severe erosion of the post-Cold War international order during the latter stages of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Following years of unified Western military deterrence and strict adherence to the principles of territorial sovereignty, the 2025 inauguration of the Trump administration catalyzed a profound geopolitical rupture. By analyzing back-channel diplomacy, the Anchorage summit, and the restrictive 28-point American peace proposal, this study traces Washington’s rapid pivot toward transactional, bilateral negotiations with Moscow. The analysis reveals how this superpower-centric mediation systematically marginalized European allies and applied coercive diplomatic pressure on Kyiv to accept maximalist Russian territorial demands. The paper argues that the United States has actively retreated from the universalist doctrine of international law, adopting a nineteenth-century spheres-of-influence model. Ultimately, this emerging “New Yalta” framework implicitly validates military conquest as a legitimate tool of statecraft, institutionalizing a highly volatile, frozen conflict while simultaneously forcing a rapid, continent-wide militarization of Europe in direct response to an increasingly unreliable American security umbrella.

Keywords: *Russia-Ukraine War, Transatlantic Security, Spheres of Influence, Great-Power Bilateralism, New Yalta.*

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Introduction

The structural transformation of the transatlantic security architecture during the Russo-Ukrainian War presents a critical case study in the mechanics of great-power diplomacy and the erosion of the post-Cold War international order.¹ While a unified Western strategy of military deterrence, economic containment, and strict adherence to the principle of territorial integrity characterized the conflict's initial phase (2022–2024),² the Trump administration's ascent in 2025 catalyzed a severe rupture in this geopolitical consensus.³ This paper examines the rapid transition from collective allied support for Kyiv to a framework of transactional, bilateral US-Russian negotiations. The central research question guiding this analysis asks: How does Washington's pursuit of a superpower-centric peace settlement that systematically marginalizes European stakeholders and pressures Ukraine into structural concessions, redefine the sovereign parameters of the post-Soviet space? By tracing the evolution of back-channel diplomacy, formal summits, and imposed peace memorandums throughout 2025, this study argues that the United States has actively retreated from the universalist doctrine of international law. Ultimately, the emerging diplomatic paradigm suggests a calculated reversion to a nineteenth-century spheres-of-influence model, wherein the geopolitical alignment and territorial boundaries of Eastern Europe are unilaterally negotiated between Washington and Moscow.

To systematically parse this shifting geopolitical landscape, this study establishes its analytical foundation upon structural realism and hegemonic stability theory. Within this theoretical paradigm, a “sphere of influence” operates as an institutionalized arrangement where a primary great power establishes an exclusive security veto over its contiguous geographic perimeter, thereby directly constraining the foreign policy options and sovereign alignments of smaller neighboring states. This dynamic intersects closely with the mechanics of “transactional diplomacy,” which evaluates foreign policy choices through the lens of immediate bilateral utility, material trade-offs, and relative gains, prioritizing these tangible metrics over enduring multilateral frameworks or universalist legal norms. Together, these concepts form the basis of the “New Yalta” framework. This model captures a systemic shift

¹ Allison, Graham. “The New Spheres of Influence: Sharing the Globe with Other Great Powers.” *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 2 (March/April 2020): 30–40.

² Isabel Bramsen and Isak Svensson, “Peace Talks in the Russia-Ukraine War: When, Who, and How?,” *International Negotiation* 30, no. 1 (2024): 97–122, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-bja10106>.

³ Daehnhardt, Patricia. “The Euro-Atlantic Security Order and the War in Ukraine.” *Jean Monnet Atlantic Network 2.0* (2022).

back toward a classic great-power concert, where dominant states prioritize global equilibrium over the political independence of smaller nations.

Since assuming power in the early 2000s, Vladimir Putin and his political circle have pursued the overarching objective of reasserting Russian hegemony across the post-Soviet space. A decisive element of this geopolitical strategy involved dismantling the post-Euromaidan administrations in Ukraine that had emerged from the Orange Revolution and the 2014 Euromaidan.⁴ Open hostilities commenced in 2014 with the forceful annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the subsequent emergence of self-proclaimed republics in Donetsk and Luhansk. Over the following years, the localized crisis steadily escalated into a comprehensive interstate war.

The conflict's immediate prelude crystallized in December 2021 amid a massive Russian military buildup along the Ukrainian border. On December 17, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued draft mutual security agreements directed at the United States and NATO.⁵ Moscow demanded a definitive halt to NATO enlargement, specifically precluding Ukrainian accession, and a prohibition on deploying additional allied forces or long-range weaponry in Eastern European member states. The drafts further insisted that Washington cease military cooperation with post-Soviet republics and abandon any prospective military bases in those territories. Washington and NATO categorically rejected these proposals, characterizing them as an unacceptable ultimatum. Western officials condemned the demands as a direct infringement on the sovereign right of independent states, including Ukraine, to determine their own security alignments.

Following the collapse of these diplomatic overtures, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The anticipated swift military victory failed to materialize, instead triggering unprecedented Western sanctions. The earliest concerted effort to negotiate a settlement took place in Istanbul between March and April 2022. By April 15, negotiators had outlined a draft agreement stipulating a ceasefire, permanent Ukrainian neutrality, sweeping reductions to its armed forces, and binding security guarantees from the permanent members of the

⁴ Hamilton, Daniel S., and Stefan Meister. "The Eastern Question: Russia, the West, and Europe's Grey Zone." *German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP)* (2016).

⁵ "Russian Foreign Ministry Publishes Draft Security Agreements with NATO and the United States," *Vedomosti*, December 17, 2021, accessed December 5, 2025, in Russian: ["МИД России опубликовал проекты договоров с НАТО и США по безопасности," *Ведомости*, 17 декабря 2021, (дата обращения: 05.12.2025)], <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2021/12/17/901297-mid-rossii-opublikoval-proekti-dogovorov>.

UN Security Council.⁶ The framework also proposed recognizing Russian as an official language while temporarily deferring Crimea's territorial status. Concurrently, Moscow withdrew its forces from the Kyiv and Chernihiv axes, framing the retreat as a goodwill gesture. Ultimately, the prospective treaty was abandoned, a collapse widely attributed to the intervention of Ukraine's European allies, particularly British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Simultaneously, the revelation of mass civilian casualties in newly conquered areas like Bucha triggered massive domestic outrage, fundamentally altering the political calculus in Kyiv. These atrocities stripped the Zelensky administration of the domestic political capital required to sell severe territorial or security compromises to a deeply traumatized and radicalized Ukrainian public.

The diplomatic landscape shifted further in September 2022, when President Volodymyr Zelensky presented the "Ukrainian Peace Formula" to the UN General Assembly. The proposal rested on two core pillars: the restoration of Ukraine's pre-2014 borders, necessitating the return of Crimea, and structural accountability for Russian aggression.⁷

Trump's Strategic Realignment and the Resumption of US-Russia Negotiations

The year 2023 defined the primary attritional phase of the Ukraine war.⁸ Throughout this period, the Biden administration and the European leaders maintained a unified front, relying on sustained military support and robust sanctions to degrade Russian capabilities. Diplomatic engagement remained virtually nonexistent. This paradigm fractured following Donald Trump's inauguration in January 2025. His electoral victory the previous November was heavily anchored in a platform critical of massive foreign military expenditures and focused on an immediate cessation of hostilities. Consequently, Washington's pivot toward direct diplomatic in-

⁶ "Full Text of the Istanbul Agreement Between Russia and Ukraine Published: What Were the Main Disagreements," *Lenta.ru*, June 15, 2024, accessed December 5, 2025, in Russian: ["Обнародован полный текст стамбульского договора между Россией и Украиной. В чем крылись главные разногласия," *Лента.Ру*, 15 июня 2024, (дата обращения: 05.12.2025)], <https://lenta.ru/news/2024/06/15/obnarodovan-polnyy-tekst-stambulskogo-dogovora-mezhdu-rossiey-i-ukrainoy-v-chem-krylis-glavnye-raznoglasiya/>.

⁷ "Ukraine's Peace Formula: Global Dimension and Shared Principles." *Foreign Policy Council 'Ukrainian Prism'* (2024), <https://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Peace-Formula%E2%80%9393final.pdf>.

⁸ Franz-Stefan Gady and Michael Kofman. "Ukraine's Strategy of Attrition." *Survival* 65, no. 2 (2023): 7-22. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00396338.2023.2193092>.

tervention was highly anticipated, ultimately materializing in an initial phone call between the two heads of state.⁹

Occurring in February 2025, just weeks into the new administration, this bilateral discussion represented a diplomatic success for Vladimir Putin. It effectively pierced the isolation imposed by the West since the invasion began. More significantly, it initiated negotiations over Ukraine's future in the exclusive, superpower-to-superpower format Moscow has long preferred. Policy analysts observed that even if Trump rejected the Kremlin's maximalist demands, the dialogue itself delivered immediate strategic dividends for Russia. The conversation inherently signaled a fracturing of Western consensus and functioned as a mechanism to pressure Kyiv into acknowledging shifting battlefield and geopolitical realities.¹⁰

The Kremlin swiftly capitalized on this outreach, framing the direct contact as the foundation for a broader strategic convergence between Washington and Moscow. As Alexander Baunov suggests, Russian leadership envisions this dynamic mirroring the World War II-era alignment between Roosevelt and Stalin, capable of transcending ideological divides to forge a new global architecture akin to Yalta and Potsdam. Such a bipolar realignment aligns perfectly with Putin's enduring ambition to overwrite the legacy of the Cold War and reverse its resulting systemic humiliations.¹¹ This revisionist intent is evident in how Moscow portrays the Ukraine settlement: not merely as a localized peace process, but as the inauguration of a restructured world order. The glaring marginalization of European stakeholders in both US and Russian readouts of the February call reinforces this bilateral exclusivity. Trump's own rhetoric further facilitated Moscow's narrative. By asserting that the war would never have occurred under his prior leadership and pub-

⁹ A. Gaponenko, "Russian-Ukrainian Conflict: Interests of the Participants, Internal Limitations, External Environment and Resolution Scenarios," *Zavtra*, January 9, 2025, accessed January 17, 2026, in Russian: [Гапоненко А., "Российско-украинский конфликт: интересы участников, внутренние ограничения, внешняя среда и сценарии разрешения," *Завтра*, 9 января 2025, (дата обращения: 17.01.2026)], https://zavtra.ru/blogs/rossijsko-ukrainskij_konflikt_interesi_uchastnikov_vnutrennie_ogranicheniya_vneshnyaya_sreda_i_stsenarii_razresheniya.

¹⁰ Tatiana Stanovaya, "The Long-Awaited Call: What Putin Is Counting On in Negotiations with Trump," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 2025, accessed December 7, 2025, in Russian: [Татьяна Становая, "Долгожданный звонок. На что рассчитывает Путин в переговорах с Трампом," *Фонд Карнеги за Международный Мир*, февраль 2025, (дата обращения: 07.12.2025)], <https://carnegieendowment.org/-russia-eurasia/politika/2025/02/putin-trump-phone-call?lang=ru>.

¹¹ Alexander Baunov, "Killing With Kindness: Why Putin Is Proving So Amenable to Trump," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 2025, accessed December 7, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/02/putin-trump-relationship-goals?lang=en>.

licly praising Putin's willingness to engage, the new administration's messaging subtly deflected culpability away from the Kremlin, transferring the ultimate blame for the conflict onto the preceding Biden administration.

Following the initial phone call, the Russian and American delegations convened in Riyadh on February 18, 2025. These early discussions primarily centered on restoring severed diplomatic channels and stabilizing bilateral contacts.¹² By March, the Saudi capital hosted a subsequent round of negotiations. This diplomatic acceleration followed a highly contentious White House reception where Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky openly clashed.¹³ In a stark departure from established diplomatic protocol, the Ukrainian president faced direct and public criticism from the American president. Recognizing the severe vulnerability of his administration's position, Zelensky ultimately yielded. Shortly thereafter, he authorized an agreement granting the United States highly preferential extraction rights to Ukraine's mineral reserves.¹⁴ Within weeks of the new administration assuming power, the geopolitical dimensions of the conflict were partially subordinated to a transactional dispute over rare earth metals. Control over Ukraine's vast, untapped reserves of lithium, titanium, and uranium presents a critical asset in the broader Sino-American technological competition.¹⁵ For the new US administration, securing exclusive extraction rights offered a tangible, domestic political victory to justify continued diplomatic engagement, framing the resolution of the war not as a defense of democratic ideals, but as a highly profitable acquisition for the American industrial base. Kyiv leveraged its resource base to secure reconstruction financing and bilateral security guarantees. Moscow countered by proposing joint extraction ventures targeting deposits in both Russia and the recently annexed

¹² "Russia and the US Agreed to Restore Embassy Staff in Moscow and Washington — Rubio," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, February 18, 2025, accessed December 6, 2025, in Russian: ["РФ и США договорились восстановить штат посольств в Москве и Вашингтоне — Рубио," *Независимая газета*, 18 февраля 2025, (дата обращения: 06.12.2025)], <https://www.ng.ru/news/810974.html>.

¹³ "Quarrel of the Year: What Are the Consequences of the Zelensky-Trump Conflict and Will Europe Save the Situation," *Odessa Media*, accessed December 6, 2025, in Russian: ["Ссора года. Какие последствия конфликта Зеленского и Трампа и спасет ли ситуацию Европа," *Одесса-Медиа*, (дата обращения: 06.12.2025)], <https://odessamedia.net/news/ssora-goda-kakie-posledstviya-konflikta-zelenskogo-i-trampa-i-spaset-li-situatsiyu-evropa>.

¹⁴ "Treasury Announces Agreement to Establish United States-Ukraine Reconstruction Investment Fund," *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, May 22, 2024, accessed December 6, 2025, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0126>.

¹⁵ NATO Energy Security Centre of Excellence (ENSEC COE). "Ukraine's resources. Critical raw materials." December 10, 2024. Accessed via NATO ENSEC COE: <https://www.enseccoe.org/publications/ukraines-resources/>.

Ukrainian territories. A potential monopoly over these critical supply chains rapidly dominated the negotiating agenda, a shift the American president publicly endorsed as a diplomatic resolution.¹⁶

The Riyadh summits notably lacked direct bilateral engagement between Kyiv and Moscow. Instead, Washington assumed a formal mediating role, conducting separate consultations with each delegation. American negotiators focused on de-escalating strikes against energy infrastructure and brokering a localized ceasefire in the Black Sea to establish a foundation for future comprehensive talks. These efforts yielded a temporary suspension of maritime hostilities. While both belligerents signaled a willingness to accept a provisional truce, the broader conventional war persisted.¹⁷ Throughout this process, European leaders remained entirely marginalized. While capitals across the continent maintained an uncompromising stance advocating sustained military pressure without territorial concessions, Trump actively distanced his administration from the European allies. Unlike his counterparts in Berlin, Paris, and London, the American president eschewed the role of a steadfast Ukrainian ally. He instead positioned the United States as a detached third-party broker, explicitly willing to negotiate substantive territorial concessions directly with the Kremlin.

From the outset of these negotiations, the Russian strategy extended beyond the immediate theater of Ukraine. The Kremlin actively sought to broaden the scope of bilateral cooperation with Washington, aiming to exacerbate existing transatlantic fissures and ultimately fracture the cohesive Western alliance¹⁸. Russian officials overtly capitalized on this emerging divide, favorably highlighting Vice President J. D. Vance's address at the Munich Security Conference. Rather

¹⁶ Mikhail Korostikov, "Trump's Dream of a Rare Earths Deal With Kyiv or Moscow Is Wishful Thinking," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 2025, accessed December 7, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/02/russia-usa-ukraine-metals-agreement?lang=en>.

¹⁷ "Results of Negotiations with the US in Riyadh: Key Takeaways," *RBC*, March 25, 2025, accessed December 6, 2025, in Russian: ["Итоги переговоров с США в Эр-Рияде. Главное," *РБК*, 25 марта 2025, (дата обращения: 06.12.2025)], <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/25/03/2025/67e143199a79474f8ec31a75>.

¹⁸ The current US administration's foreign policy approach has prompted a broader reassessment of the transatlantic security architecture. Recent initiatives—including a recalibration of Washington's strategic priorities regarding the Ukrainian crisis and direct bilateral engagements with Russia—suggest a shift in the traditional US role concerning European defense burden-sharing. Consequently, diplomatic relations between the US and major European powers (Germany, France, Italy, and the UK) are increasingly exhibiting competitive dynamics alongside their traditional alliance structure. Furthermore, localized geopolitical disputes, such as those concerning Greenland, continue to test NATO's internal cohesion.

than condemning Russian aggression, Vance used the platform to castigate European allies for alleged domestic censorship and a failure to manage internal security threats.¹⁹ Concurrently, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth publicly dismissed the feasibility of restoring Ukraine's pre-2014 borders or facilitating its accession to NATO. Facing this coordinated rhetorical pressure from its primary benefactor, Kyiv was compelled to recalibrate its strategic requirements for border restoration. Ukrainian leadership had to quietly acknowledge the necessity of territorial concessions, the indispensable nature of American aid, and the fading prospect of a decisive military victory. This pressure culminated in the US president characterizing Zelensky as a "dictator" bearing personal responsibility for instigating the conflict. While Moscow celebrated this severe deterioration in US-Ukrainian relations as a fatal blow to the collective West, the shifting landscape presented new strategic liabilities for the Kremlin. The fracturing of Western consensus and the unpredictability of an "America First" doctrine catalyzed an immediate hardening of European defense policy.²⁰ Throughout the year, capitals like Berlin, Paris, and London responded with significantly intensified defense rhetoric, substantial defense budget increases, and renewed debates regarding the deployment of European combat troops directly to the Ukrainian frontline.²¹ This aggressive recalibration was particularly pronounced in Berlin, where the newly installed conservative government decisively abandoned the prior administration's incrementalism in favor of rapid, structural militarization. Recognizing that the American security umbrella was no longer a guaranteed baseline, European leadership realized that building an autonomous, continent-wide deterrence capability was an immediate existential requirement rather than a long-term theoretical goal.

There is another crucial dynamic to consider: the negotiation process is slowing down largely because a pro-Trump faction has yet to emerge within Ukraine's

¹⁹ "The US in the World," *Munich Security Conference 2025*, accessed December 7, 2025, <https://securityconference.org/en/msc-2025/agenda/event/the-us-in-the-world-2/>.

²⁰ The Trump administration—involving key figures such as Marco Rubio, Steven Witkoff, Keith Kellogg, Jared Kushner, and Vice President J.D. Vance—has sought a primary mediating role in efforts to resolve the conflict in Ukraine. However, achieving a durable resolution likely requires the consensus of major European allies. Consequently, unilateral diplomatic initiatives by the US are frequently accompanied by close consultations with key European leaders, including Emmanuel Macron, Keir Starmer, Friedrich Merz, and Giorgia Meloni, highlighting the ongoing necessity of transatlantic coordination.

²¹ "Not So Much About Ukraine: What Putin Hopes to Gain from Normalizing Relations with the US," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 2025, accessed December 7, 2025, in Russian: ["Не столько об Украине. Чего Путин добивается от нормализации отношений с США," *Фонд Карнеги за Международный Мир*, февраль 2025, (дата обращения: 07.12.2025)], <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia- Eurasia/politika/2025/02/russia-usa-talks-goals?lang=ru>.

political elite. This void stems from a mix of factors, including Kyiv's deeply entrenched strategic partnerships with Western democratic institutions... Civil society leaders and pro-democracy advocates continue to hold significant sway in Ukrainian politics, viewing Washington's new direction with deep suspicion. Since early 2014, Ukraine's political establishment has heavily favored the Democrats; following the Euromaidan revolution, the newly formed government desperately needed American support, which at the time was provided by the Obama administration.²²

Several other roadblocks are making it difficult for Trump and Ukrainian politicians to find common ground. Current and former representatives of various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) continue to hold significant sway in Ukrainian politics. These civil society figures view Washington's new direction with deep suspicion, a sentiment that escalated following recent pressures and crackdowns on the USAID and other American foundations that fund these groups in Ukraine.²³ Furthermore, this resistance at the top is heavily backed by public opinion. Recent polling shows that 73 percent of Ukrainians view Trump's presidency as a negative development for their country.²⁴ Given this climate, expecting a robust pro-Trump camp to take shape in Kyiv is highly unrealistic. The absence of sympathetic interlocutors within the Ukrainian elite severely constrains Washington's ability to exert soft power or utilize back-channel diplomacy. Driven by this structural limitation, the American administration has increasingly relied on coercive public ultimatums to force compliance, a tactic that only further alienates the Ukrainian populace and solidifies institutional resistance.

At the negotiating table, the next major hurdle is the narrative that "NATO expansion caused the war." Within certain political factions in the West, the narrative that the alliance's growth provoked the conflict has gained traction. This specific interpretation of events fundamentally shapes Trump's vision for peace. He has argued that the Biden administration's push to integrate Ukraine into NATO triggered the Russian attack, and therefore, officially closing NATO's doors to Ukraine will eliminate the root cause of the war. However, within his first 100 days in office, Trump's administration realized that Moscow's definition of "root caus-

²² Konstantin Skorkin, "Where Is Ukraine's Pro-Trump Camp?," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 2025, accessed December 11, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/04/ukraine-trumpist-elites?lang=en>.

²³ Skorkin, "Where Is Ukraine's Pro-Trump Camp?"

²⁴ Anastasia Prots, "73% of Ukrainians Negatively Evaluate Trump's Presidency — KIIS," *Ukrainska Pravda*, April 1, 2025, accessed December 11, 2025, in Russian: [Анастасия Проц, "73% украинцев негативно оценивают президентство Трампа – КМИС," *Українська правда*, 1 апреля 2025, (дата обращения: 11.12.2025)], <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2025/04/01/7505488/>.

es” is much broader. Russia is essentially aiming to rewrite the outcomes of the Cold War. In response, Trump has already signaled his willingness to make major concessions—including formally recognizing Crimea and other occupied regions as Russian territory, initiating the removal of sanctions, normalizing trade and diplomatic ties, and welcoming Moscow back to the table for global decision-making. In other words, the groundwork is actively being laid for a “New Yalta” agreement. Such an arrangement would effectively resurrect a nineteenth-century spheres-of-influence model, explicitly subordinating the sovereignty of smaller Eastern European states to the strategic comfort of recognized great powers. By entertaining this framework, Washington signals a potential retreat from the universalist, rules-based international order it championed post-1945, substituting it with a transactional realism that legitimizes territorial conquest as a valid tool of statecraft.

The Ceasefire Question and the Russian-Ukrainian Meeting in Istanbul

The biggest roadblock to peace remains the absolute clash between Russian and Ukrainian demands. US Special Envoy Steven Witkoff spent three months trying to hammer out a final American proposal for both sides. However, as became clear after a meeting in Paris on April 17,²⁵ Kyiv and its European allies firmly rejected it. Subsequent counter-offers did not bring anyone closer to a compromise, and by late April, Washington’s peace efforts had hit a dead end.

On May 10th, Kyiv, backed by European partners, issued an ultimatum: Moscow must agree to an unconditional 30-day ceasefire or face a fresh wave of sanctions. The Kremlin could have just ignored this and kept fighting, but instead, they decided to launch their own peace initiative while simultaneously pushing for a full restoration of diplomatic ties with the US. Moscow declared a three-day truce to coincide with the May 9th Victory Day holiday, using the opportunity to lobby the Americans for a high-level bilateral summit. In a face-to-face meeting between the two presidents, the Kremlin hoped to convince Trump that the war could not end without regime change in Kyiv and a complete halt to military aid for Ukraine. The underlying premise of Russian diplomacy was that the current Ukrainian leadership is fundamentally incapable of seriously negotiating Russia’s peace terms. This operating assumption stems from Moscow’s deeply entrenched ideological conviction that Kyiv lacks genuine political agency, functioning solely as an expendable proxy for Western intelligence apparatuses. Consequently, the Kremlin calculates that

²⁵ Kira Krasovskaya, “Negotiations Between the US, Europe, and Ukraine Held in Paris,” *DW*, accessed December 18, 2025, in Russian: [Кира Красовская, “В Париже прошли переговоры США, Европы и Украины,” *DW*, (дата обращения: 18.12.2025)], <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-parize-prosli-peregovory-ssa-evropy-i-ukrainy/a-72279339>.

any durable settlement can only be forged directly with the architect of that proxy relationship, bypassing Ukrainian officials entirely to negotiate directly with Washington.

Throughout May and June, Russian diplomats scrambled to lock in their geopolitical gains, either through sheer force or by securing external legitimacy. During this period, the ceasefire question took center stage. Zelensky insisted that stopping the fighting was an absolute prerequisite for talks. Putin, on the other hand, remained convinced that any pause would simply give Ukraine time to regroup and launch a new counteroffensive. While President Trump publicly supported the idea of a 30-day ceasefire,²⁶ Putin proposed a totally different path: starting negotiations without stopping the fighting, or picking up where the stalled Spring 2022 Istanbul talks left off, talks that had also occurred while combat was ongoing.

For Russia, reviving the aborted Istanbul process is the most convenient way to legitimize its victory on the world stage. The 2022 negotiations were essentially about securing Ukrainian concessions in exchange for halting the Russian advance, in other words, dictating the terms of a Russian win. Back then, neither Ukraine nor the West was willing to rubber-stamp Russia's conquests. Now, however, there is a greater willingness to entertain the idea, largely because Trump is directly pressuring Ukraine to yield.²⁷

This dynamic birthed the idea of inviting the Ukrainians to meet in Istanbul, ostensibly to resume the talks that collapsed in April 2022. Moscow signaled its readiness to engage directly with Kyiv, conveniently pushing the question of Zelensky's legitimacy to the background. This shift was not primarily driven by the fear of new sanctions; rather, the Kremlin simply did not want to jeopardize its broader dialogue with Washington on other issues.

The US-brokered mediation efforts of May and June culminated in a new summit in Istanbul on June 2. The positions of the parties going into the meeting were starkly different. First, Trump had pushed hard for both Putin and Zelensky to attend in person; Zelensky showed up, but Putin stayed home. The Russian delegation arrived demanding international recognition of its newly annexed territories,

²⁶ Gennady Svidrigailov, "The US Demands a 30-Day Ceasefire in Ukraine. Trump Threatens New Sanctions," *Gazeta.ru*, May 9, 2025, accessed December 15, 2025, in Russian: [Геннадий Свидригайлов, "США требуют 30-дневного прекращения огня на Украине. Трамп угрожает новыми санкциями," *Газета.Ру*, 9 мая 2025, (дата обращения: 15.12.2025)], <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2025/05/09/21007112.shtml>.

²⁷ "If Trump Abandons Ukraine, Can Europe Help Kyiv Fight On? The Clock Is Ticking to Answer That," *AP News*, accessed December 15, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-europe-trump-defense-putin-zelenskyy-862fe7f477d372024d22cb74508adf6f>.

strict Ukrainian neutrality, massive cuts to Ukraine's military, official status for the Russian language, the lifting of all Western sanctions, and the waiving of any claims for war reparations.²⁸ Ukraine, meanwhile, demanded binding international security guarantees, formal recognition of its right to join NATO, and the return of all occupied territories.²⁹ In essence, both sides just traded maximum demands.³⁰ Russia actually brought two separate documents to the table: one detailing their vision for a long-term peace settlement, and another focused solely on ceasefire terms. The full scope of their maximalist demands was laid out in a proposed peace memorandum titled "Basic Parameters for a Final Settlement."³¹ Ultimately, the June talks in Istanbul only produced an agreement on exchanging prisoners of war and the remains of fallen soldiers. The only real breakthrough was that, for the first time in three years, Ukrainian and Russian officials actually sat down together for direct talks.

Among policy experts, the prevailing view is that this second round of Istanbul talks simply confirmed the obvious: Putin is not interested in a temporary ceasefire because he wants a final treaty that cements his victory. Relying on Russia's sheer numerical advantage and seemingly unbothered by heavy casualties, Putin is increasingly confident that he can simply grind Ukraine down into capitulation.³² The Kremlin sees clearly that the Trump administration has no intention of asking Congress to fund new aid packages for Kyiv. Furthermore, the threat of new sanctions is increasingly viewed as an empty gesture in Moscow, especially since Washington is not even rushing to penalize countries that are helping Russia by-

²⁸ "Full Text of Russia's Memorandum 'On the Settlement of the Ukrainian Crisis' Published," *Meduza*, June 2, 2025, accessed December 11, 2025, in Russian: ["Опубликован полный текст меморандума России "по урегулированию украинского кризиса", *Meduza*, 2 июня 2025, (дата обращения: 11.12.2025)], <https://meduza.io/feature/2025/06/02/opublikovan-polnyy-tekst-memoranduma-rossii-pouregulirovaniyu-ukrainskogo-krizisa>.

²⁹ "Reuters Published the Text of the Ukrainian Ceasefire Memorandum," *RBC*, June 1, 2025, accessed December 11, 2025, in Russian: ["Reuters опубликовал текст украинского меморандума о прекращении огня," *РБК*, 1 июня 2025, (дата обращения: 11.12.2025)], <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/01/06/2025/683c6a149a794732b1af799e>.

³⁰ Alexander Baunov, "Diplomatic Theater: Who Are the Russian Negotiators Trying to Please," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, accessed December 11, 2025, in Russian: [Александр Баунов, "Дипломатический театр. Кому пытаются угодить российские переговорщики," (дата обращения: 11.12.2025)], https://storage.googleapis.com/crng/russia-trump-peace-talk-confusion.html?utm_source=telegram&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=post

³¹ Baunov, "Diplomatic Theater."

³² Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). "Russia's War in Ukraine: The Next Chapter." September 30, 2025. Accessed May 1, 2026. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-war-ukraine-next-chapter>.

pass the current restrictions. After all, Russia has been living under sanctions since 2014, and Putin approaches each new round of restrictions with confidence, betting that the Russian economy can weather the storm.³³ This resilience has been heavily subsidized by a rapid macroeconomic pivot toward Asian markets, specifically through discounted hydrocarbon exports to China and India. Furthermore, the institutionalization of parallel import networks and the reliance on shadow maritime fleets have systematically insulated the domestic Russian consumer base from the severe financial deprivations initially projected by Western treasuries. This underlying confidence explains why Putin essentially ignored Trump's ultimatum for a ceasefire and kept the offensive against Ukraine rolling. Acceding to these demands would have required the alliance to formally abrogate its foundational Open-Door policy, fundamentally violating the core tenets of the 1949 Washington Treaty. Furthermore, retreating to pre-1997 force postures would have immediately compromised the defensive integrity of the Baltic states and Poland, effectively fracturing the alliance's internal cohesion.

The Trump-Putin Summit in Alaska

The collapse of the ceasefire negotiations did not deter Trump. Undeterred, he dispatched his special envoy, Steve Witkoff, to the Kremlin with a clear message: the US president was genuinely interested in Vladimir Putin's proposal for a one-on-one meeting, and he already had a time and place in mind.

The choice of Alaska as the venue carried immense symbolic weight for both nations.³⁴ Holding a geopolitical summit on the very territory that serves as a geographic and historical bridge between Russia and the United States was, in itself, a radical move. Both leaders are deeply fixated on the perceived past glory of their respective nations. For Russia, Alaska represents the absolute zenith of its continental empire.³⁵ For the US, it marks the golden age of American expansionism.³⁶ Trump naturally views the acquisition of Alaska as the ultimate real estate deal, but

³³ Nate Reynolds and Eugene Rumer, "Europe Must Lead to Prevent the Worst in Ukraine," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 2025, accessed December 26, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/07/ukraine-russia-drone-missile-strikes-europe-weapons-defense-plan?lang=en>.

³⁴ Brandon M. Boylan, "Alaska in U.S.-Russian Relations from the Alaska Purchase to the Russo-Ukrainian War," in *GlobalArctic*, ed. G. Rekvig and M. Finger (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-4868-9_2.

³⁵ Ilya Vinkovetsky, *Russian America: An Overseas Colony of a Continental Empire, 1804–1867* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13–28.

³⁶ Andrei Znamenski, "History with an Attitude: Alaska in Modern Russian Patriotic Rhetoric," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 57, no. 3 (2009): 346–373.

it also serves as a historical reminder of a Russian territorial concession. The location selection was likely also a subtle flex aimed at neighboring Canada and Denmark. By choosing an Arctic staging ground, Washington and Moscow implicitly projected their shared dominance over the polar region's emerging maritime routes and unexploited resources. This secondary messaging served to sideline other Arctic Council members, reinforcing the summit's overarching theme of exclusive, superpower-centric diplomacy dictating global security terms.

The highly anticipated summit took place on August 15, 2025, at a military base in Anchorage, Alaska. The two leaders spoke for three hours. While the meeting produced no signed agreements, it undeniably marked the high-water mark of US-Russian diplomatic engagement over the Ukraine conflict. The outcome of the Anchorage summit can be boiled down to a simple binary: if Trump had managed to bully or coax Putin into a ceasefire, the summit would have been an American victory. Any other outcome was a win for Putin. By that metric, Putin won; the meeting ended without a ceasefire agreement.

The exact details of what Trump and Putin discussed behind closed doors remain highly classified, though Reuters managed to leak several key details.³⁷ According to their reporting, the two presidents haggled over a potential compromise on Ukraine. Russia reportedly offered a slight territorial concession, indicating a willingness to return portions of the Sumy, Kharkiv, and Dnipropetrovsk regions. However, Moscow refused to budge on its core maximalist demands: Ukraine must abandon its bid for NATO membership, drastically slash the size of its military, legally prohibit the stationing of Western troops on its soil, undergo what Moscow terms "demilitarization and denazification," enshrine its non-nuclear status, and officially recognize all remaining Russian-occupied territories. Furthermore, the Kremlin demanded the total lifting of all Western sanctions. Reuters had also previously flagged several other Russian conditions floated in Alaska, including the possibility of Ukraine receiving non-NATO security guarantees from the West, granting official state status to the Russian language, and guaranteeing unrestricted operations for the Russian Orthodox Church within Ukraine.

Perhaps the most significant takeaway from Alaska was that Trump fundamentally conceded to Putin's framing of the conflict. Trump agreed that chasing a fragile, temporary ceasefire was a waste of time and that negotiations should bypass it entirely, moving straight toward a comprehensive peace treaty. Crucially,

³⁷ "Reuters Explained What Compromise Russia is Ready for in a Deal with Ukraine," *RBC*, August 21, 2025, accessed December 26, 2025, in Russian: ["Reuters объяснил, на какой компромисс готова Россия в сделке с Украиной," *РБК*, 21 августа 2025, (дата обращения: 26.12.2025)], <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/21/08/2025/68a73c8b9a79471e0adf-1d4d>.

Russia's definition of "peace" requires addressing the "root causes" of the war and establishing "equal and indivisible security." In Kremlin parlance, this means Russia must have veto power over the security arrangements of other nations if it deems them threatening. By implicitly accepting this framework, Trump effectively abandoned the unified stance held by Ukraine and its European allies, aligning himself much closer to Moscow's worldview.³⁸

In the immediate aftermath, the summit and a subsequent meeting between Zelensky and European leaders in Washington sparked a brief wave of optimism that the war might actually be drawing to a close. For the first time in years, the belligerents and their backers were discussing tangible steps toward a settlement.

However, the ensuing months proved that the long-term outlook had not fundamentally shifted. While diplomats could point to minor tactical wins, the strategic picture remained grim. The brutal fighting on the ground did not skip a beat, and the European triad of Starmer, Macron, and Merz continued to steadfastly support Ukraine's position against territorial concessions. For these European leaders, validating Russian territorial annexations poses an existential threat to the continent's entire security architecture. They harbor a collective anxiety that allowing border modifications via military force in Ukraine will establish a fatal legal precedent, inevitably inviting future Russian incursions against more vulnerable states along the eastern flank.

Many geopolitical analysts accurately noted that the surprise Anchorage summit primarily revealed that neither Washington nor Moscow had the appetite for a major, uncontrolled escalation. Trump essentially admitted that he no longer believed sanctions alone could force Russia to capitulate. Putin, meanwhile, was desperate to keep a direct line open to Trump, recognizing him as the only Western leader willing to engage in bilateral dialogue. There was no grand bargain, but Putin achieved a massive strategic shift: he successfully dragged the negotiating framework toward Russia's vision for ending the war. This victory manifested in two crucial ways. First, Trump internalized the belief that a nuclear-armed Russia simply cannot be decisively defeated on the battlefield, leading to the conclusion that the war in Ukraine has no viable military solution. Second, the White House dropped its demand for an immediate ceasefire, accepting Putin's core argument

³⁸ Alexander Baunov, "Alaska Summit Leaves Ukraine a Hostage to Russia's Demands of the West," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, August 2025, accessed January 3, 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/08/alaska-summit-putin-trump?lang=en>.

that the parties must skip a truce and immediately negotiate the terms of a long-term, structural peace.³⁹

Post-Alaska, both Moscow and Washington operate under the shared assumption that continued, escalating confrontation serves neither side. This understanding forms the bedrock of their future relationship: deep disagreements over Ukraine will persist, but they are superseded by a mutual determination to prevent a direct US-Russian military conflict. Meanwhile, the European capitals, which had hoped that Trump would eventually grow frustrated and abandon his outreach to Putin, were left disappointed.⁴⁰

The Post-Alaska Diplomatic Landscape

By September 2025, the international community was desperate for a breakthrough. The White House, hoping to capitalize on the momentum of the bilateral summit in Alaska, began pushing hard for a three-way meeting between Trump, Putin, and Zelensky. The goal was to solidify Trump's image as the ultimate dealmaker. The Kremlin, however, had other plans. Moscow began implying that it would simply refuse to sign any final peace treaty with Zelensky, consistently asserting that his mandate had expired and he was no longer the legitimate president of Ukraine.

This maneuvering was a clear signal: the Kremlin wanted elections in Ukraine, and they wanted them soon. Russian strategists calculated that forcing a wartime vote would inevitably trigger a massive political and social crisis in Kyiv. Consequently, the sheer logistics of getting the Russian and Ukrainian presidents in the same room became the primary battleground of the US-brokered peace talks. Trump demanded a summit; Zelensky, eager for a resolution, agreed. But Putin engaged in a masterclass of diplomatic evasion. He could not flat-out reject the American president, so he stalled, constantly attaching new preconditions to any potential meeting with his Ukrainian counterpart.⁴¹ Zelensky, acutely aware of his

³⁹ Tatiana Stanovaya, "Tactical Victories in Ukraine Peace Talks Will Only Lead to Strategic Defeat," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, August 2025, accessed January 3, 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/08/russia-usa-ukraine-alaska-goals?lang=en>.

⁴⁰ Jonathan Martin, "How to Avoid the Putin Slow-Walk: A New Trump Ultimatum," *Politico*, August 20, 2025, accessed January 3, 2026, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2025/08/20/trump-putin-negotiation-ultimatum-bill-00515477>.

⁴¹ Andrey Pertsev, "Why Is the Kremlin Insisting on Ukraine Holding Elections?," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 2025, accessed January 13, 2026,

precarious position, was racing the clock—he needed to secure a peace deal before any forced elections took place, knowing that without one, his political survival was practically zero.

The turning point of 2025 came on November 20, when Washington finally dropped its formal vision: a comprehensive, 28-point American peace proposal. A delegation of high-ranking US military officials, led by Dan Driscoll, flew to Kyiv to formally present the blueprint to Zelensky.⁴²

In essence, the proposed framework demanded a radical restructuring of the geopolitical landscape, beginning with severe territorial concessions. The United States offered formal recognition of Crimea, Luhansk, and Donetsk as *de facto* Russian territory, proposing the partition of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions along the active line of contact. In exchange for a Russian withdrawal from peripheral occupied zones, Kyiv would abandon its remaining foothold in Donetsk to establish a Russian-controlled buffer. Militarily and structurally, the plan required capping the Ukrainian Armed Forces at 600,000 personnel and constitutionally prohibiting NATO integration, though it permitted the pursuit of European Union membership. This was coupled with an agreement barring all NATO troops from Ukraine and restricting allied aviation to Poland, compensated by a Russian non-aggression pact and a definitive halt to NATO's eastward expansion. The financial dimensions were highly transactional: \$100 billion in frozen Russian assets would fund Ukrainian reconstruction, yet the United States demanded a 50 percent cut of the generated profits and required Europe to match the initial sum, while funneling the remaining seized assets into a joint US-Russian investment vehicle. To finalize the settlement, the blueprint mandated a phased rollback of Western sanctions, Moscow's readmission to the G8, comprehensive blanket amnesties, forced Ukrainian national elections exactly 100 days post-signing, and an immediate, binding truce upon ratification.

To sweeten this bitter pill for Kyiv, Trump's plan included a robust set of security guarantees modeled explicitly on Article 5 of NATO. These guarantees would legally obligate the US and its European allies to treat any attack on Ukraine as an attack on the entire "transatlantic community." The text stipulated that any "significant, deliberate, and sustained armed attack" by Russia would trigger an

<https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/09/russia-ukraine-zelensky-replacement?lang=en>.

⁴² "Trump's Peace Plan for Ukraine Published – Read the Full Text: The US Promises Ukraine Security Guarantees, But Not NATO Membership," *Yle*, accessed January 13, 2026, in Russian: ["Опубликован мирный план Трампа для Украины – читайте полный текст. США обещают Украине гарантии безопасности, но не членство в НАТО," *Yle*, (дата обращения: 13.01.2026)], <https://yle.fi/a/74-20195384>.

immediate response from the US and its allies, up to and including military force. These guarantees would lock in for ten years, with the option for renewal. According to US officials, the Trump administration genuinely viewed this security umbrella as a “massive victory” for Ukraine’s long-term survival.⁴³ From Kyiv’s perspective, however, substituting formal NATO integration with bilateral paper guarantees resurrected the spectral trauma of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. Ukrainian strategists argued that without the physical presence of allied tripwire forces or immediate Article 5 deterrence, any localized security pact would inevitably degrade into a temporary armistice. Such an arrangement, they feared, would merely grant the Russian military the operational pause required to reconstitute its forces and rectify its logistical failures for a future offensive.⁴⁴

Objectively, the 28-point plan was a radical, heavily compromised document. It had the genuine potential to freeze the conflict and permanently alter the geopolitical map of Eastern Europe. Think tanks and policy circles were deeply divided on its merits, and it remains unclear whether the finer points of this proposal were secretly hammered out during the Alaska summit.

The reaction in Kyiv was bleak. In a somber video address to the nation, Zelensky described the moment as one of the darkest chapters in Ukrainian history, vowing he would never sign a deal that humiliated his country. The pressure campaign from Washington was brutal; Western media reported that the US had explicitly threatened to cut off all intelligence sharing and weapons shipments if Kyiv balked. Trump, projecting trademark confidence, publicly declared that a peace deal could be finalized by November 27. Putin, meanwhile, calmly confirmed that Moscow had received the proposal and coyly suggested it “could serve as a basis” for peace.

Instead of rejecting the American plan outright, Kyiv took out a red pen. They heavily edited the document, slashing it down to a 20-point counter-proposal. Shortly after, Zelensky publicly unveiled these 20 points, which were now the subject of furious, three-way negotiations between Kyiv, Moscow, and Washington. In a press conference with Ukrainian journalists on December 24, Zelensky framed this revised 20-point plan as the “foundational document for ending the war.” However, he admitted that several massive hurdles remained, pointing specifically to the unresolved status of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant and the ultimate fate of the occupied territories.

⁴³ “Trump Ukraine Peace Plan: 28 Points,” *Axios*, November 20, 2025, <https://www.axios.com/2025/11/20/trump-ukraine-peace-plan-28-points-russia>.

⁴⁴ Institute for the Study of War. “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 20, 2025.” November 20, 2025. Accessed May 1, 2026. <https://understandingwar.org/-research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-november-20-2025/>.

Conclusion: The Anatomy of a Deadlock

Ultimately, the diplomatic whiplash of 2025 failed to produce a viable off-ramp for the Ukrainian crisis. The high-stakes negotiating track between Washington and Moscow collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions, and 2026 opened exactly as the previous year had: with the relentless grind of combat operations on the ground.

Europe's political establishment outright rejected Trump's 28-point blueprint. In its place, the EU floated a counter-proposal that effectively gutted Washington's core concessions to Moscow. The European framework refused any caps on the Ukrainian military, insisted that territorial negotiations be strictly confined to the current line of contact, and fiercely protected Kyiv's right to future NATO accession.

What followed was a dizzying, globe-trotting diplomatic theater. US and Ukrainian delegations held supposedly "productive" talks in Geneva, but the only tangible result was the surgical removal of the most contentious issues from the draft, effectively kicking the can down the road. Meanwhile, thousands of miles away in Abu Dhabi, American and Russian envoys sat down for parallel discussions. Moscow's message was unambiguous: the Kremlin viewed the original, unedited 28-point American plan as a highly acceptable "foundation for a peaceful settlement."

Desperate to bridge this widening chasm, the US hosted another round of talks with the Ukrainians in Florida, but the structural roadblocks remained immovable. An American delegation then flew straight to Moscow for direct, closed-door talks with Vladimir Putin. While the exact readouts remain classified, the ensuing silence was deafening: no compromise had been reached.

Recognizing the futility of forcing a single, omnibus treaty, Washington pivoted. The monolithic peace plan was fractured into four distinct, siloed documents: one addressing Ukrainian sovereignty, another tackling the territorial carve-up, a third outlining the resumption of Western-Russian economic cooperation, and a final, sweeping framework for a new European security architecture.

Yet, late-stage negotiations between the US and Ukraine continued to trip over the twin hurdles of land and leverage. A heavily revised 20-point draft surfaced, notably introducing the concept of a demilitarized zone (DMZ) in the Donbas. Buoyed by the unwavering support of the Macron-Starmer-Merz triumvirate, Zelensky attempted to fundamentally rewrite this document during a tense summit in Berlin with US Special Envoy Steve Witkoff and European leaders. The only major concession Washington yielded was the promise of "platinum security guar-

antees” for Kyiv, a euphemism for a binding bilateral defense pact closely mirroring NATO’s Article 5.

The final diplomatic gasp of 2025 took place in Miami, where Witkoff shuttled between separate, back-to-back meetings with the Russian and Ukrainian delegations. It was a final exercise in futility. In the immediate aftermath, the Kremlin slammed the door, officially declaring that the aggressive amendments pushed by Kyiv and its European backers had fatally poisoned Trump’s peace initiative.

Ultimately, the diplomatic trajectory of 2025 illustrates a profound systemic regression in international relations, characterized by the abandonment of collective defense architectures in favor of transactional great-power bilateralism. Washington’s aggressive push for a rapid, superpower-brokered settlement that is anchored in the 28-point proposal and the Anchorage summit demonstrates a calculated willingness to sacrifice Ukrainian territorial integrity and European strategic autonomy to achieve immediate geopolitical realignment. By accommodating Moscow’s structural demands and implicitly validating the use of military force to alter sovereign borders, this emerging “New Yalta” framework effectively dismantles the post-Cold War security consensus. This paradigm shift leaves Europe acutely isolated, catalyzing a rapid, continent-wide militarization as allied capitals recognize the American security umbrella is no longer guaranteed. Rather than establishing a durable peace, this exclusionary mediation process is positioned to institutionalize a volatile, frozen conflict, cementing a dangerous international precedent that legally subordinates the sovereignty of independent states to the strategic conveniences of competing hegemonies.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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BETWEEN GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS AND SOCIAL FRAGILITY: EXPLAINING YOUTH RADICALIZATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of geopolitical tensions on youth radicalization in Central Asia, arguing that the phenomenon emerges from the interaction between domestic vulnerabilities and external strategic pressures. It moves beyond causal explanations based solely on socio-economic or religious factors and situates radicalization within the broader context of Eurasian power competition and regional insecurity. Using an interdisciplinary framework that combines political and geopolitical analysis with systemic and institutional approaches, the study identifies key drivers of radicalization, including unemployment, marginalization, labor migration, digital propaganda, prison radicalization, and identity-based tensions, alongside the destabilizing spillover effects of conflicts in Afghanistan and the Middle East. The article further demonstrates that intensifying rivalry among major and regional powers reshapes the regional security environment in ways that can indirectly facilitate extremist mobilization. It concludes that addressing youth radicalization in Central Asia requires a comprehensive and coordinated strategy that integrates domestic reform with a clear understanding of the broader geopolitical dynamics influencing regional stability.

Keywords: *Central Asia, youth radicalization, religious extremism, terrorism, geopolitical tensions, regional security, political Islam.*

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Introduction

Contemporary patterns of youth radicalization increasingly reflect the interaction between domestic vulnerabilities and broader geopolitical transformations. While radicalization is often explained through socio-economic or ideological factors, its evolution in recent decades suggests a more complex configuration shaped by transnational dynamics, regional instability, and shifting power relations within the international system. In this context, Central Asia represents a particularly significant case in which internal structural pressures intersect with external geopolitical influences to create conditions conducive to the spread of extremist ideologies.

Rather than being confined to specific territorial or organizational centers, religious extremism today operates through diffuse and adaptive networks that transcend national boundaries. At the same time, the growing involvement of young people in extremist movements has transformed youth into a central target group for recruitment and mobilization. This trend is not limited to a single region. It reflects a broader global pattern, visible in both Western and non-Western contexts, where identity crises, political marginalization, and failures of integration have contributed to new forms of radical engagement.¹

This article advances the argument that youth radicalization in Central Asia cannot be explained through single-factor models; rather, it is produced through the multilevel interaction of geopolitical pressures and domestic structural fragility, requiring an integrated geopolitical–sociological framework of analysis. In this context, the geopolitical dimension assumes particular importance. Historical experience suggests that geopolitical dynamics have long been among the key factors shaping the development of radicalism and terrorism.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan has characterized extremism and terrorism as threats to peace and stability in the country, emphasizing that the main goal is to prevent the spread of extremist ideas and the recruitment of young people by terrorist organizations.² In this regard, Kazakhstan needs to create conditions that strengthen societal resilience to the propaganda of religious extremist organizations. At the same time, it is necessary to understand the mechanisms and main drivers of youth radicalization. To situate this analysis within the broader

¹ Malise Ruthven, “How Europe Lost Faith in Multiculturalism,” *Financial Times*, August 23, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/dd122a8c-8720-11e7-8bb1-5ba57d47eff7>.

² “Tokayev Called on the International Community to Move to a Comprehensive Strategy to Eradicate Terrorism,” *KT.kz*, March 28, 2017, in Russian: [“Токаев призвал международное сообщество перейти к всеобъемлющей стратегии искоренения терроризма,” *KT.kz*, 28 марта 2017 г.], https://www.kt.kz/rus/politics/tokaev_prizval_mezhdunarodnoe_sobshchestvo_perejti_k_vseobyemljushtej_strategii_iskorenenija_terrorizma_1153636779.html.

academic discourse, the article engages with both domestic and international scholarship on radicalism, terrorism, and extremism, which together present a complex historical-philosophical, political, sociological, and legal picture of the problem.

The main focus of Western researchers has been the broader phenomenon of terrorism, its definition, origins, and the factors driving its spread. Jean Baudrillard³ and Ulrike Meinhof⁴ have examined extremism and terrorism as forms of organizing and expressing violence, including political violence. A. Rashid,⁵ B. Lia,⁶ C. Murray,⁷ and Y. Musharbash⁸ explore the definitional problem of international terrorism and extremism, drawing attention to their similarities with concepts such as 'war,' 'aggression,' and 'surrogate war.' The emergence and evolution of threats posed by extremism and terrorism in Central Asia and Afghanistan have been thoroughly studied by R. Magnus,⁹ O. Roy,¹⁰ Q. Wiktorowicz,¹¹ A. Polat,¹² S. Cornell,¹³ S. Guancheng,¹⁴ and others.

Among Russian scholars, there is a substantial body of work dedicated to the causes of the spread of extremism and terrorism; however, these studies generally

³ Jean Baudrillard, "The Mirror of Terrorism," in *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1993), 85–91.

⁴ Ulrike Meinhof, "The Urban Guerilla Concept," trans. Anthony Murphy, in *The Red Army Faction: A Documentary History*, vol. 1, *Projectiles for the People*, ed. André Moncourt and J. Smith (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2009), 83–104.

⁵ Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 140.

⁶ Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of al-Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 262.

⁷ Craig Murray, "The Mysterious Islamic Jihad Union," September 8, 2007, https://www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2007/09/the_mysterious/.

⁸ Yassin Musharbash and Matthias Gebauer, "Claiming Responsibility for Terror: Islamic Jihad Union Threatens Attacks Outside Germany," *Spiegel Online*, September 12, 2007, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/claiming-responsibility-for-terror-islamic-jihad-union-threatens-attacks-outside-germany-a-505265.html>.

⁹ Ralph H. Magnus and Eden Naby, "Afghanistan and Central Asia: Mirrors and Models," *Asian Survey* 35, no. 7 (July 1995): 614.

¹⁰ Olivier Roy, *Genealogy of Islamism* (Paris: Fayard, 2011), in French: [Olivier Roy, *Généalogie de l'islamisme* (Paris: Fayard, 2011)].

¹¹ Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): 209–210, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100500497004>.

¹² Abdumannob Polat, "Central Asian Security Forces Against Their Dissidents in Exile," in *Central Asia: Conflict, Resolution, and Change*, ed. Roald Z. Sagdeev and Susan Eisenhower (Chevy Chase, MD: Center for Post-Soviet Studies Press, 1995), 197–216.

¹³ Svante E. Cornell and Regine A. Spector, "Central Asia: More Than Islamic Extremists," *The Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 197.

¹⁴ Xing Guangcheng, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the Fight against Terrorism, Extremism, and Separatism," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, no. 4 (16) (2002).

address terrorism as a whole and do not focus specifically on the participation of Central Asian youth in terrorist and extremist organizations.¹⁵ The most significant developments have been made in the work of V. Emelyanov,¹⁶ S. Lantsov,¹⁷ E. Kozhushko,¹⁸ and M. Kreshno.¹⁹ Only a limited number of studies examine the threat of religious extremism in Central Asian countries, including the work of I. Zvyagelskaya.²⁰

In Central Asia, most authors analyzing the reasons for youth involvement in extremist movements tend to focus on terrorism and extremism rather than on the causes of radicalization. However, scholarship on the nature of terrorism in Central Asia, together with studies of regional cooperation in counterterrorism and counterextremism, provides a useful basis for examining this issue.²¹ Central Asian scholars such as G. Saidazimova,²² A. Khamidov,²³ and A. Mamaraimov²⁴ have

¹⁵ Mariya A. Antonenko and Oleg V. Shkelya, "Extremism in the Youth Environment," in *Actual Problems of Administrative Activities of the Police*, no. 7 (Krasnodar, 2015): 3, in Russian: [Антоненко М. А. и Шкеля О. В., "Экстремизм в молодежной среде," в *Актуальные проблемы административной деятельности полиции*, № 7 (Краснодар, 2015): 3].

¹⁶ Vyacheslav P. Emelyanov, *Terrorism as an Act and Corpus Delicti* (Kharkov, 1999), 112, in Russian: [Емельянов В. П., *Терроризм как деяние и состав преступления* (Харьков, 1999), 112].

¹⁷ Sergey A. Lantsov, *Terror and Terrorists: A Dictionary* (St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg University Press, 2004), 187 pp., in Russian: [Ланцов С. А., *Террор и террористы: словарь* (СПб.: Изд-во Санкт-Петербургского университета, 2004), 187 с.].

¹⁸ Evgenii P. Kozhushko, *Modern Terrorism: Analysis of the Main Directions* (Minsk: Kharvest, 2000), 448 pp., in Russian: [Кожушко Е. П., *Современный терроризм: анализ основных направлений* (Минск: Харвест, 2000), 448 с.].

¹⁹ Martha Crenshaw, *Terrorism and International Cooperation* (Moscow: INION, 1990), in Russian: [Креншо М., *Терроризм и международное сотрудничество: реферат* (М.: ИНИОН АН СССР, 1990)].

²⁰ Irina D. Zviagelskaya et al., *The Threat of International Terrorism and Religious Extremism to the CSTO Member States in the Central Asian and Afghan Directions* (Moscow: Analytical Association of the CSTO; Institute for International Studies, MGIMO University, 2017), in Russian: [И. Д. Звягельская и др., *Угроза международного терроризма и религиозного экстремизма государствам – членам ОДКБ на центральноазиатском и афганском направлениях* (Москва: Аналитическая ассоциация ОДКБ; Институт международных исследований МГИМО МИД России, 2017)].

²¹ Azizjon S. Rakhmonov, "External and Internal Factors of Youth Involvement in the Ranks of Terrorist Organizations," *Kazan Pedagogical Journal*, no. 6 (2015), in Russian: [Рахмонов А. С., "Внешние и внутренние факторы вовлечения молодежи в ряды террористических организаций," *Казанский педагогический журнал*, № 6 (2015)].

²² Gulnoza Saidazimova, "Central Asia: Is Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Really Back?" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 2, 2006, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1065364.html>.

²³ Alisher Khamidov, "Hizb-ut-Tahrir Faces Internal Split in Central Asia," *Eurasianet*, October 21, 2003.

examined the problems of extremism. The threats of extremism and terrorism, as well as the main areas of cooperation between Kazakhstan and international organizations in combating them, have been analyzed by Kazakhstani scholars B. Sultanov,²⁵ K. Baizakova,²⁶ and F. Kukeyeva²⁷.

The literature review reveals a significant gap in the scholarship: while extremism continues to develop new forms and methods, there is still no sufficiently comprehensive body of research addressing recent trends in the theory and practice of countering religious extremism and terrorism or the causes of youth radicalization in Central Asian countries.

Methodology: The research is grounded in a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach that draws on a range of theoretical and methodological frameworks for the study of radicalization, international terrorism, and extremism, including political analysis and a geopolitical perspective. The concept of ‘radicalism’ is ambiguous and requires interpretation, in light of geographic location and other relevant factors. Within this framework, radicalism is conceptualized as primarily concerned with the substantive content of ideas rather than the methods through which they are implemented. Radicalism can be ideological rather than action-based, unlike extremism, which is always action-oriented but not always ideological. However, radicalism tends to use violent methods and practices. In such cases, it can directly merge with extremism and evolve into it, finding its specific, practical political expression in various forms of terrorism.²⁸

²⁴ Abdumomun Mamaraimov, “Jury Out on Kyrgyz Islamists,” *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, November 5, 2007.

²⁵ Bulat K. Sultanov, “Threats of Destabilization in Central Asia,” in *Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, no. 1 (2016): 69–84, in Russian: [Буллат К. Султанов, “Угрозы дестабилизации в Центральной Азии,” *Россия и новые государства Евразии*, № 1 (2016): 69–84].

²⁶ Kuralay Baizakova, “The Geopolitical Consequences of the Arab Spring for the Countries of Central Asia,” in *Policies and Cooperation in the Euro-Mediterranean Space* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2014), 155–65, in French: [Kuralay Baizakova, “Les conséquences géopolitiques du Printemps arabe pour les pays de l’Asie centrale,” dans *Politiques et coopérations dans l’espace euro-méditerranéen* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2014), 155–65]; Kuralay Baizakova and Kairat Bekov, “Fighting Terrorism in Central Asia in the Post-2014 Context,” *Contemporary Political Society* 4 (Winter 2016): 33–46.

²⁷ Fatima T. Kukeyeva, “Democracy as a Strategy of Combating Terrorism,” *KazNU Bulletin. International Relations and International Law Series* 2, no. 62 (2013): 50–54, in Russian: [Ф. Т. Кукеева, “Демократия как стратегия антитерроризма,” *Вестник КазНУ. Серия международные отношения и международное право* 2, № 62 (2013): 50–54].

²⁸ Dmitry V. Olshansky, *Psychology of Terrorism* (St. Petersburg: Piter, 2002), 286 pp., in Russian: [Ольшанский Д. В., *Психология терроризма* (СПб.: Питер, 2002), 286 с.].

The ideological foundations of Islamist terrorism and extremism warrant particular attention in the early twenty-first century, a period in which political Islam has often figured prominently in debates on the global spread of terrorism and political extremism. Radical Islam can therefore be approached as a distinct phenomenon shaped by the politicization of religious teachings and their distorted interpretation by extremist groups.

The analysis draws on political analysis, geopolitical theory, and a layered approach to identify the main factors shaping youth radicalization in the region. The globalization theory of terrorism is based on the premise that contradictions, uncertainty, the unpredictability of the development of a structurally divided world, processes of political integration, and the advancement of modern information technologies have contributed to the rapid growth of extremism, terrorism, and terrorist organizations as actors in global politics. Situational analysis facilitated a better understanding of the specifics of youth participation in terrorist and extremist organizations. Alongside the methods discussed above, the study integrates systemic, empirical, and content-analytical methods with structural-functional and institutional approaches to comprehensively examine youth involvement in extremist and terrorist organizations.

Key Factors Driving the Rise of Radical Sentiments Among Youth in Central Asia

Scholarly debate over the causes of rising radicalization remains unresolved. Explanations range from socio-economic deterioration and the structure of political regimes to broader sociocultural change marked by the erosion of established values and moral norms. The growth of youth protest sentiments and, consequently, the emergence of radical political and religious organizations in Central Asia emerge as social responses to the complex and often disruptive processes of social, political, and economic modernization shaping these countries. States facing the problem of youth radicalization develop their own indicators, influenced by geopolitical location, internal political structure, and cultural and religious characteristics. To analyze the situation in Kazakhstan and Central Asia as a whole, it is necessary to determine how well commonly accepted measures are appropriate for identifying the factors that drive youth involvement in extremist and terrorist groups and movements in the region.

Socio-economic conditions remain central to explanations of youth radicalization. Education shapes employment opportunities for young people, yet higher educational attainment does not eliminate unemployment. In this context, access to social mobility becomes particularly significant. Marginalized groups also remain

vulnerable to the influence of religious extremist preachers. Labor migration from Central Asia should likewise be analyzed as a factor linked to youth radicalization. The socio-economic dimension of youth radicalization reflects more than material hardship alone. It is formed through the interaction of objective conditions and subjective experiences produced by broader processes of societal development. In Central Asia, these pressures often converge with religious influences, allowing religion, including its extremist expressions, to function for some young people as a language of protest against unemployment, marginalization, and wider social exclusion.

The growing role of Internet technologies and social networks in spreading and promoting extremist views is evident, especially among youth. In several countries, including those in the post-Soviet space, recruitment into radical structures primarily relies on the Internet.²⁹ At the same time, efforts to involve young people in radical religious organizations promote a religious way of life that undermines the secular development of the state and society.

A major trend over the past decade has been the growing interaction between organized criminal groups and Islamist radical organizations. In Kazakhstan, for example, the intertwining of crime and radical extremist groups occurs due to prison radicalization, whereby extremists within penitentiary institutions enlist criminals into their ranks.³⁰ An increasingly important factor is the politicization of Islam. The religious renaissance is being exploited by the authorities of several states to address their external and internal political objectives.

Another level of analysis concerns the geopolitical environment of the countries in the region. External conditions contributing to the emergence of terrorism and religious extremism are closely linked to military-political instability in Afghanistan and the Middle East, as well as to external financial support, cross-border drug trafficking, and broader adverse geopolitical circumstances. Alongside other forms of transnational crime, these factors continue to serve as important sources of instability and terrorism financing.

Serious destabilization in Central Asia could occur if extremist and terrorist dynamics originating in the Middle East expand further into Afghanistan, thereby creating a fundamentally new security situation in the neighboring region. An

²⁹ Anastasia Iu. Tolstukhina, “‘Generation Online’ Needs Protection,” *International Affairs* [*Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'*], no. 5 (2018): 79, in Russian: [А. Ю. Толстухина, “‘Поколение онлайн’ нуждается в защите,” *Международная жизнь*, № 5 (2018): 79].

³⁰ Serik Beisembaev, *Religious Extremism in Kazakhstan: Between Crime and Jihad* (Almaty: Public Foundation “Strategiya,” 2015), 28 pp., in Russian: [Серик Бейсембаев, *Религиозный экстремизм в Казахстане: между криминалом и джихадом* (Алматы: ОФ “Стратегия,” 2015), 28 с.].

alarming background is emerging in the border zone, but at present, this does not indicate that serious upheavals are imminent in Central Asia. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan appear to have the most developed protective capacities in the region. The situation in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is less straightforward. In Kyrgyzstan, however, continued dialogue with religious movements seems to have limited the risk of serious radicalization among the broader population. Nevertheless, external forces are unlikely to influence internal processes in the region in the near future, as they lack a social base among the local population. Moreover, the distinct cultural and historical characteristics of the region make it unlikely that events here will follow the same pattern. The combination of these factors reduces the likelihood of an immediate security threat in Central Asia.

Two realities turn the hypothetical threat of religious extremism in the Central Asian countries into a current agenda for their governments. The first reality pertains to the internal problems of these countries. The second involves the influence of external forces on Central Asia.

Thus, the causes of youth radicalization in Central Asia are multifaceted. Socio-economic and geopolitical factors, demographic and structural changes in society, religious factors, and an identity crisis all play a role, pushing young people to seek their roots, life, and spiritual values, including within the religious sphere. The threat of religiously motivated extremism is present in nearly all five Central Asian states, but it manifests with varying intensity. Kazakhstan stands out as a case in which terrorism and extremism have not reached an acute level, and the broader threat environment remains relatively low.

Geopolitical Tensions and Youth Radicalization in Central Asia

The development of radicalism and terrorism is shaped not only by domestic conditions but also by foreign policy and wider geopolitical dynamics. This is especially visible across Eurasia, where developments in the Middle East and surrounding regions continue to influence broader patterns of instability and radicalization. The geopolitical environment of Central Asia is changing significantly. The regional balance of power is increasingly influenced by international developments, including events far beyond the region, which Central Asian states closely monitor. This is due to the role of major powers that either border Central Asia or exert considerable political, economic, and cultural influence over the region.

Central Asia can be understood as a weakly institutionalized security region whose dynamics are shaped by both regional and global forces. Its strategic environment reflects the interactions between the Central Asian states and a wider set of external actors. Among the key factors shaping this environment are limited

state capacity, the active involvement of extraregional powers, and the presence of transnational non-state actors.

For Russia and China, maintaining stability in the region aligns with important strategic interests. Amid escalating tensions with the West, Russia views Central Asian countries as a buffer against threats of radicalism and extremism from the south. Accordingly, Russia has actively opposed American initiatives to modernize the Greater Middle East and to politically reshape the extensive Muslim world, including Central Asian states. Given the evolving political landscape in Central Asia, Kazakhstan and the other states of the region would benefit from maintaining a calibrated relationship with Russia, one that preserves the benefits of economic integration without reinforcing asymmetric dependence.

China is an important partner for the Central Asian states, and dialogue with Beijing continues on a wide range of issues. Economic ties between China and the region have expanded steadily. For Kazakhstan, however, this cooperation also carries the risk of reinforcing a raw-material-based economy, since Chinese investment remains focused mainly on oil and gas extraction. In the medium term, China may further strengthen its economic and political influence in the region.

Since Donald Trump's second term, the US administration has adopted a course toward neo-isolationism, protectionism, and an America-centric worldview, placing significant strain on the existing global security architecture. Trump has repeatedly undermined alliance relationships, agreements, partnerships, and, most importantly, long-standing positions established by his predecessors. At the same time, he considers the fight against extremism and terrorism to be one of the most serious threats to the international community. However, effective counterterrorism requires close cooperation with allies within global structures.³¹

The US's position in Central Asia has weakened noticeably. This is reflected, among other things, in the rarity of its summits with Central Asian leaders. Nevertheless, the American regional initiative "C5+1" could serve as a foundation for exploring new opportunities for regional countries to collaborate with the US. The Central Asian states should aim to strengthen their position as Washington's partners, including by developing security partnerships within "C5+1." The foreign ministers of Central Asian states and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed cooperation in counterterrorism during a C5+1 meeting.

New opportunities for cooperation in foreign policy and security are also emerging through the 2019 EU Strategy for Central Asia. At the same time, the EU

³¹ Richard Haass, "Present at the Disruption: How Trump Unmade U.S. Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 5 (September/October 2020), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/donald-trump-present-disruption-foreign-policy>.

is experiencing internal challenges related to migration, future security, and budget issues. The US and its European allies also pursue their own interests in the region, which they view as a platform for exerting pressure on both Russia and China.

Meanwhile, the interests of global actors in and around Central Asia are expressed above all through military-political and economic engagement, rather than through the spiritual sphere. In this regard, it is crucial to have a clear understanding of what long-term interests Kazakhstan and Central Asia as a whole may represent for the US, the EU, Turkey, Iran, China, and Russia.

The main danger is that Central Asian states may become objects of competition among major geopolitical power centers. This is the so-called “New Great Game,” involving leading regional and global states competing for resources and transit potential in Central Asia. Consequently, questions concerning how the situation in the Greater Middle East will develop, what internal and external factors will influence the course of events, and how all of this might affect Kazakhstan's position become of fundamental importance.

Another significant aspect is the intensification of competition among regional powers actively involved in serious geopolitical processes. The regional environment is increasingly shaped by overlapping rivalries among major and regional powers, including those between the US and China, the US and Russia, the US and Iran, Turkey and Iran, and the EU and Russia. These tensions inevitably influence the foreign policies of the states in the region, most visibly in the information sphere.

Amid the deterioration of Russia's relations with Europe, China is expected to become the main market for Russian petroleum products, gradually dictating its own terms. Close political, economic, and geopolitical cooperation between China and Russia serves as a guarantee of stability and security in Central Asia. While Russia covers the region in the field of military-technical cooperation, China plays a leading economic role through investment, trade, and infrastructure engagement. Radical forces frequently exploit these geopolitical contradictions to advance their own agendas. Additional external funding increases the capacity of extremist groups to broaden their social base, diversify channels of material and military support, and conduct more effective propaganda.³²

The rivalry among global and regional powers is driven by competition over trade and transit routes, natural resources, and the ability to shape the regional geopolitical agenda. Considering the main geostrategic and geo-economic interests of

³² Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015), 73.

various players, it is possible to model potential scenarios for the development of events in the region's geopolitical landscape or in specific areas of it.³³

The Afghanistan factor continues to encompass a range of threats and risks for Central Asian countries, serving as a significant obstacle to the development of regional economic cooperation and the realization of Central Asia's rich transit potential. The main military-political threats from Afghanistan to Central Asian countries and, in particular, to the Republic of Kazakhstan, are primarily associated with the lack of effective central authority, which may leave territories uncontrolled by the state. Such areas could serve as safe havens for radical groups that pursue various interests. In the case of Afghanistan, this mainly concerns border regions with Central Asia that could be used as a launchpad for religious-ideological or military-political expansion.

China has begun to strengthen its military and technical capabilities in Central Asia, specifically in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan. China's involvement in strengthening the Tajik–Afghan border and training Afghan forces is interpreted in different ways by other regional actors. Russia, the US, Pakistan, India, and Iran are already accustomed to the traditional balance of power in the region, and China's involvement appears as a new phenomenon within the conventional distribution of forces.³⁴

Contradictions among states and major powers can intensify the activity of radical forces, which are at times instrumentalized as tools of geopolitical competition. Notably, the highest number of attacks worldwide and activities of international terrorist organizations occur in conflict zones in South Asia and the Middle East, where there is an active process of delineating geopolitical influence between global and regional powers.

The future of Central Asia will depend largely on relations among the major powers active in the region, especially the US, China, Russia, the broader West,

³³ Irina D. Zviagelskaya et al., *The Threat of International Terrorism and Religious Extremism to the CSTO Member States in the Central Asian and Afghan Directions* (Moscow: Analytical Association of the CSTO; Institute for International Studies, MGIMO University, 2017), in Russian: [И. Д. Звягельская и др., *Угроза международного терроризма и религиозного экстремизма государствам – членам ОДКБ на центральноазиатском и афганском направлениях* (Москва: Аналитическая ассоциация ОДКБ; Институт международных исследований МГИМО МИД России, 2017)].

³⁴ Sofiya Musofir, "China Is Gradually Displacing Russia from the Tajik Pamir," *EADaily*, December 17, 2019, <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2019/12/17/kitay-postepenno-vytesnyaet-rossiyu-s-tadzhikskogo-pamira>, in Russian: [София Мусофир, "Китай постепенно вытесняет Россию с таджикского Памира," *EADaily*, 17 декабря 2019 г., <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2019/12/17/kitay-postepenno-vytesnyaet-rossiyu-s-tadzhikskogo-pamira>].

Turkey, and Iran. The military-political situation will remain tied to the strategic interests of leading global and regional actors. It is also important to consider the cost of maintaining regional stability and the interests behind preserving the status quo.

Geopolitical contradictions across Eurasia reveal a landscape shaped by multiple competing interests, while also pointing to a clear relationship between intensifying geostrategic rivalry among global and regional powers and the growing vulnerability of individual states to destabilization. An important role in amplifying destabilization processes is primarily played by a segment of society traditionally associated with youth. As E. Garbuzarova notes, external forces may exploit national, ethnic, and socio-economic factors in Central Asia and the surrounding regions, with direct consequences for Kazakhstan's long-term national and strategic interests.³⁵

Taken together, these trends produce a range of risks that call for targeted policy responses. These include a narrowing of maneuvering space within the framework of a multi-vector policy amid the ongoing geopolitical struggles in Central Asia among global players: China, the US, and Russia. At the current stage, the tasks for Kazakhstan within the multi-vector approach have become significantly more complex, and the risks associated with such a policy are increasing. At the same time, given our circumstances, an alternative approach is unacceptable.

International Experience in Combating Religious Radicalism, Extremism, and Terrorism

The rise of terrorism, extremism, and radicalism as security concerns in Central Asia has increased the importance of international experience in this field. The approaches developed by other states and regional organizations may offer useful lessons for strengthening regional responses.

In Europe and the US, approaches to counterterrorism and counterextremism are more developed. Many of these countries have expressed interest in assisting the Central Asian countries by sharing their expertise and skills in combating terrorism, extremism, and radicalism. Some countries and organizations have gone further and offered financial and material assistance. In Europe, specialized organizations have been established to facilitate cooperation among states in countering

³⁵ Elena G. Garbuzarova, "Foreign Policy of Central Asian Countries: Results of 30 Years of Development," *Central Asia and the Caucasus. Russian Edition* 24, no. 4 (2021): 52–65, in Russian: [Елена Г. Гарбузарова, "Внешняя политика стран Центральной Азии: итоги 30-летнего развития," *Центральная Азия и Кавказ. Российское издание* 24, № 4 (2021): 52–65].

extremism. Their work is primarily related to analytical activities and to the coordination of actions among government bodies, agencies, and organizations involved in countering extremist activities.

In European countries, there is a clear trend toward strengthening liability for extremist crimes, alongside the use of legal provisions that encourage the cooperation of individuals involved in criminal activity. In Germany, Italy, and France, law enforcement agencies have accumulated extensive experience in combating extremism over many years. The main features of their approach include the existence of counterterrorism legislation and specialized counterterrorism centers, a well-developed justice system, the effective work of agencies engaged in counterextremism measures, dedicated programs aimed at preventing extremism, the active involvement of civil society institutions, and cooperation with the mass media.³⁶

In the US and Israel, approaches to countering extremism prioritize the involvement of civil society in countering terrorism, the development and implementation of programs such as civic education, the encouragement of civic activity, and the engagement of citizens in activities related to public safety and law enforcement.³⁷ Non-governmental organizations actively participate in the fight against extremism and terrorism in these two countries.

Along with positive international experience, it is important to consider negative examples as well. For instance, Iraq's experience clearly demonstrates the connection between ineffective governance and the appeal of Islamism as both a solution and a means of addressing significant socio-economic and political issues. A similar situation has been observed in Algeria, where, amid a worsening financial and economic crisis, an increasing number of citizens have become more susceptible to jihadist propaganda.

Since the activities of extremist and other destructive organizations in Central Asia are predominantly cross-border in nature and actively involve international extremist organizations, cooperation within multilateral frameworks is crucial to address their manifestations. One of the important areas of cooperation with the

³⁶ O. A. Akopyan, "Countering Terrorism: Foreign Experience," *National Institute for the Development of Modern Ideology*, October 7, 2010, in Russian: [Акопян О. А., "Противодействие терроризму. Зарубежный опыт," *Национальный институт развития современной идеологии*, 7 октября 2010 г.].

³⁷ Denis Iu. Kravtsov, "Practice of Countering Extremism in Different Countries," *NB: Administrative Law and Administration Practice*, no. 4 (2019): 22–28, <https://doi.org/10.7256/2306-9945.2019.4.29819>, in Russian: [Кравцов Д. Ю., "Практика противодействия экстремизму в разных странах," *НБ: Административное право и практика администрирования*, № 4 (2019): 22–28].

UN is the sphere of re-education of extremists and terrorists. Collaboration in countering terrorism is a key aspect of the SCO's activities and even a systemic element of this international organization. The SCO's security strategy for developing joint measures to counter terrorism and extremism is focused primarily on information-analytical and coordination tasks. In the near future, it would be advisable for the SCO to address practical issues related to a settlement in Afghanistan.

The fight against terrorism in all its forms and manifestations is one of the core tasks of the CICA. CICA initiatives against terrorism and religious extremism should also include cooperation between law enforcement agencies and stronger efforts to combat poverty. In addition to its own measures to counter international terrorism, the CSTO has the opportunity to create a shared platform for cooperation with the OSCE.

The experience of foreign countries can provide important practical value for the states of Central Asia in strengthening the administrative and legal mechanisms used to counter extremism. This, in turn, requires deeper interstate cooperation, including the development of international counterextremism institutions, the more systematic incorporation of global experience, and the creation of a common international legal framework to govern such cooperation.

Opportunities for Developing a Common Central Asian Security Agenda

In order to assess the possibility of creating a regional counter-terrorism system, it is necessary to identify the particular and common methods used by Central Asian states to combat religious radicalism, extremism, and terrorism.

The counterterrorism strategy of Kyrgyzstan is focused on containing the spread of violent extremism, preventing the participation of terrorists, including those returning from abroad, in terrorist activities, and controlling the outward movement of potential Islamists. Collaboration is also hindered by factors such as a lack of coordination between the State National Security Committee (SNBC) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), as well as budgetary limitations. The government does not conduct systematic screening of potential terrorists and lacks a comprehensive biometric database at border posts. Information exchange at the regional level is quite limited. At the same time, the country faces a shortage of qualified specialists in Islam, while the overall level of religiosity is increasing, especially in rural areas. A significant share of radicalization cases involving Kyrgyz citizens appears to occur abroad.

Tajikistan, sharing a border with Afghanistan, is at the frontier of influence from various extremist groups. The situation in the country can be characterized as one of the most complex in the post-Soviet space concerning radicalization and

counter-terrorism efforts. At a consultative meeting of Central Asian heads of state in Cholpon-Ata, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon characterized the spread of religious radicalism as the most serious challenge facing the region. In his opinion, recent events in the Central Asian countries indicate that various forces continue to try to destabilize the region.³⁸ Among the negative factors are interagency fragmentation, poor coordination across law enforcement institutions, and widespread corruption. A large share of the male population migrates to Russia for work, and available evidence suggests that processes of radicalization take place there. For many young Tajiks, Russia serves as a point of departure for travel to the Middle East.³⁹

The government of Turkmenistan continues to strengthen the capacity of law enforcement agencies in counterterrorism, border protection, and the detection of terrorism financing, while also cooperating with international organizations and participating in specialized training programs.

Uzbekistan's security policy prioritizes countering radicalism and drug trafficking. Like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan is heavily concerned about security developments in Afghanistan. The border control infrastructure in Uzbekistan varies significantly, from highly militarized sections along the Afghan border to poorly controlled zones along borders with neighboring Central Asian states. Uzbek law enforcement agencies maintain their own terrorist watchlists and contribute to INTERPOL databases.

In Kazakhstan, certain Islamist currents are associated with Salafi-Wahhabi interpretations, which are marked by pronounced intolerance and, in some cases, calls for violence. According to the US Department of State, law enforcement agencies in the Republic of Kazakhstan have demonstrated a strong capacity in detecting, detaining, and preventing terrorist acts in the country.⁴⁰ Kazakhstan's counterterrorism and counterextremism legislation is regularly revised and updated. As a result, the country has developed one of the most advanced legal frameworks for combating terrorism in Central Asia. Key priorities include strengthening

³⁸ "The Most Serious Challenge for Central Asian Countries Is the Spread of the Ideology of Religious Radicalism," *Ekho Kyrgyzstana*, July 21, 2022, in Russian: ["Самым серьезным вызовом для стран ЦА является продвижение идеологии религиозного радикализма," *Эхо Кыргызстана*, 21 июля 2022 г.].

³⁹ "Addressing Radicalisation and Violent Extremism: A Central Asian Perspective," EU Delegation to Tajikistan civil society seminar, Dushanbe, October 11–12, 2016, in Russian: ["Пути решения проблемы радикализации и насильственного экстремизма — центральноазиатский взгляд," семинар гражданского общества Представительства ЕС в Таджикистане, Душанбе, 11–12 октября 2016 г.].

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2022: Kazakhstan," November 30, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2022/kazakhstan>.

preventive measures against religious extremism and terrorism, limiting the influence of external drivers of radicalization, improving the detection and disruption of extremist activity, and enhancing response mechanisms while minimizing the consequences of such acts.⁴¹

Kazakhstan's security policy has incorporated the most successful examples from other countries in the fight against radicalism and extremist activities. Currently, the potential threats to national security are clearly defined, and each area is being addressed through a systematic approach—prevention, containment, and deterrence. Kazakhstan's domestic policy has consistently emphasized the preservation of interethnic and religious harmony and the prevention of social, religious, and other forms of conflict. The broader aim of this approach is to sustain a tolerant social environment and reduce manifestations of political and religious extremism within the country, across the region, and more broadly.

According to Kazakhstan's leadership, one of the central elements of the soft counterterrorism approach is the deradicalization and reintegration of former extremists. However, developing a comprehensive strategy to prevent large-scale social radicalization through education, religion, and media remains even more challenging. For this reason, achieving a balance between soft and hard approaches often represents the key to success. Thus, preventive work with youth should be based on the understanding that young people are most susceptible to negative influences and perceive social shortcomings very acutely.

The problem of border control remains particularly acute in Central Asia, especially given the persistence of unresolved border disputes. This leads to threats such as illegal arms and drug trafficking, as well as the free movement of terrorists and extremists across poorly guarded border sections.

At the same time, there are grounds for cautious optimism that the situation is beginning to change. The spread of radical actors in Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, has not become a mass phenomenon. All five countries cooperate to some extent within international organizations and on a bilateral basis in the fight against terrorism and extremism. One of the most important differences lies in the scale and level of development of anti-terrorism legislation, funding for countering extremism and terrorism, and various border issues, such as unresolved border disputes, poor logistics, and technical support.

⁴¹ "On Approval of the State Program on Countering Religious Extremism and Terrorism in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2018–2022," Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 124, March 15, 2018, in Russian: ["Об утверждении Государственной программы по противодействию религиозному экстремизму и терроризму в Республике Казахстан на 2018–2022 годы," Постановление Правительства Республики Казахстан № 124, 15 марта 2018 г.].

Kazakhstan's more successful approaches also include engagement with the international community, the regulation of domestic migration flows, the prevention of infiltration by extremist preachers, and the deepening of regional integration through joint measures with partner states to prevent and combat religious extremism and the recruitment of youth into extremist organizations.

Kazakhstan places particular importance on regional cooperation in countering religious extremism. At the VI Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev remarked that the consultative meetings had raised regional cooperation to an unprecedented level, making it more systematic, comprehensive, and rooted in mutual trust. As he stated, "Thanks to joint efforts, long-standing issues are being resolved, and comprehensive measures are being taken to ensure regional stability and security."⁴²

In April 2025, the first meeting of the heads of intelligence agencies of Central Asian states took place in Tashkent, organized within the framework of Uzbekistan's chairmanship at the VII Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia. Representatives from all five Central Asian states discussed issues related to assessing modern threats and challenges, developing unified approaches to their neutralization, as well as enhancing cooperation in the fight against terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, illegal arms trade, transnational crime, and ensuring information and cybersecurity.⁴³

From a policy perspective, effective regional security requires close international and regional cooperation. Deepening cooperation in information security is especially important, as it can strengthen the capacity of the region's states to respond to complex emerging threats, including international terrorism and religious extremism. Kazakhstan has sought to place this agenda at the center of its engagement with Central Asian partners.

Conclusion

Thus, youth radicalization in Central Asia is not reducible to socio-economic deprivation or ideological influence alone. Rather, it emerges from the interaction between domestic structural fragilities and an increasingly volatile geopolitical envi-

⁴² "Under the Chairmanship of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the Sixth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia Was Held," *Akorda*, August 9, 2024, in Russian: ["Под председательством Касым-Жомарта Токаева состоялась VI Консультативная встреча глав государств Центральной Азии," *Акорда*, 9 августа 2024 г.].

⁴³ "Fight against Terrorism and Cybersecurity: The Heads of the Central Asian Intelligence Services Met in Tashkent," *AsiaToday*, April 25, 2025, in Russian: ["Борьба с терроризмом и кибербезопасность: Главы спецслужб ЦА встретились в Ташкенте," *AsiaToday*, 25 апреля 2025 г.].

ronment. External pressures—regional conflicts, transnational networks, and great-power competition—act as force multipliers that reshape local grievances, weaken institutional resilience, and expand recruitment opportunities. This produces a layered causal dynamic linking global transformations to individual pathways of radicalization. Addressing this phenomenon, therefore, requires an integrated analytical and policy framework that combines domestic reform with strategic awareness of geopolitical forces, moving beyond fragmented and mono-causal approaches to security and prevention.

The research shows that threats to national and regional security associated with the rise of religious extremism are shaped by a complex combination of internal and external factors. Youth extremism has several features that distinguish it from adult extremism, including heightened emotionality in conflict situations, a limited capacity for critical reflection on one's own actions, and a relative indifference to their consequences.

The analysis of the causes of radicalization among youth in Kazakhstan and Central Asian countries reveals the presence of several internal and external factors contributing to radicalization. Existing geopolitical contradictions across the vast Eurasian continent directly or indirectly influence youth radicalization. Particularly, the foreign policy interests of various countries can, under certain circumstances, become critically important in addressing youth radicalization.

When formulating medium-term measures to prevent regional security threats posed by radical extremism, it is advisable to primarily focus on identifying and eliminating the causes and conditions that foster the growth of radical sentiments. All available leverage should be employed to proactively influence the situation: political, social, economic, legal, educational, informational, propaganda, and others.

At the same time, the existing literature and policy debate point to serious shortcomings in the development of comprehensive approaches to countering extremism and terrorism. These include the absence of a shared understanding of what radicalization and extremism mean. Another deficiency is the narrow focus of efforts to prevent radicalization and violent extremism.⁴⁴ The system for countering extremism among youth is functioning inadequately: government policies are poorly coordinated among themselves and with external partners, and the information exchange system between strategic partners requires improvement.

⁴⁴ Sanzharbek Alimzhanov, "Reflections on Radicalization and Extremism in Kyrgyzstan: Understanding Perceptions and Considering Answers," *Central Asian Analytical Network*, January 4, 2016, in Russian: [Алимжанов Санжарбек, "Размышления о радикализации и экстремизме в Кыргызстане: понимание восприятий и рассмотрение ответов," *Central Asian Analytical Network*, 4 января 2016 г.].

The intensification of geopolitical contradictions has had a serious impact on the regional security environment of Central Asia and on the individual states within it. Shifts in the geopolitical status quo may exacerbate tensions between major powers and regional actors, creating conditions in which hybrid forms of confrontation could emerge, whether directly or indirectly, through the strengthening of extremist and terrorist organizations.

The study also shows that countering religious radicalism in Central Asia requires a genuinely comprehensive approach. Unlike a number of European states, some countries in the region have pursued alternative responses, including amnesty, rehabilitation, and reintegration. In Kazakhstan, this approach was reflected in Operation “Jusan,” which enabled the return of children and widows of militants, as well as other individuals who underwent a process of repatriation and rehabilitation.

At the same time, such approaches also raise serious concerns. Returning militants or ideologically radicalized individuals may retain the capacity to promote extremist views, recruit others, or contribute to the reactivation of radical networks. For that reason, the question of how safe it is to reintegrate individuals who have undergone religious, ideological, and, in many cases, military training remains highly sensitive and requires careful long-term assessment.

Kazakhstan, given its comparatively developed legal framework and its established partnerships with major geopolitical actors, possesses important prerequisites for advancing a common regional security agenda in the fight against radical extremism. More broadly, the countries of Central Asia require a coordinated and unified strategy for countering international terrorism and extremism, one that is grounded in preventive policy, regional cooperation, and a clear understanding of the political, social, and geopolitical dimensions of radicalization.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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THE SYMBOLIC WARFARE OF 9/11: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ENEMY IMAGE AND THE INSTITUTIONAL CRISIS OF THE UNIPOLAR WORLD ORDER

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Abstract

This article examines the 9/11 attacks not merely as a military event or act of transnational terrorism, but as a transformative symbolic performance that fundamentally reconfigured the architecture of global political meaning and redefined global political identity. Utilizing a cultural-anthropological framework, the study analyzes the transition from a single day of violence to a twenty-year Global War on Terror. The research focuses on the mechanisms by which the enemy image is constructed and the institutionalization of a permanent state of exception within the liberal world order. It argues that these processes operated not only through formal policy instruments but also through diffuse cultural and media practices that normalized exceptional governance across societies. By examining the intervention in Afghanistan, the authors demonstrate how security-driven discourses reproduced new forms of ethnocentrism, mass surveillance, and Islamophobia. The study concludes that 9/11 catalyzed a profound internal crisis of liberal governance and the emergence of novel modalities of global control.

Keywords: *September 11, state of exception, enemy image, cultural hegemony, Islamophobia.*

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Introduction

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, cannot be reduced to conventional military operations; their significance extended far beyond the realm of warfare.¹ The tragedy that claimed the lives of three thousand people has often been interpreted as a profound cultural and symbolic confrontation that challenged prevailing perceptions of American hegemonic invulnerability,² while simultaneously establishing a fundamental binary in the new global politics: “us” (civilized, free, liberal) versus “them” (savage, extremist, Islamist). In the aftermath, many Western governments and security agencies increasingly embraced the principle of a “state of exception” in relation to terrorism, which precipitated an unprecedented process of securitization.³ Preventive wars, mass surveillance, cultural alienation, and—in some accounts—the gradual internal erosion of democratic institutions emerged as recurring features of the post-9/11 world.⁴

From the perspective of political and cultural anthropology, September 11 can be regarded as a ritualistic performance in which both sides—al-Qaeda and the US—sought to affirm and defend their own identity and authority.⁵ The former sought to destroy highly visible symbols of capitalism and Western hegemony; the latter responded by seeking to restore its “wounded honor”⁶ through a large-scale strategic and cultural counter-offensive, while simultaneously pursuing its long-term political objectives through calculated planning. This counter-offensive, however, quickly extended beyond the immediate reaction to 9/11 and has been interpreted by critics as contributing to a long-term effort to reaffirm and extend US dominance in the global order.⁷

This article seeks to understand how a single day’s military action became the starting point for a twenty-year cultural war, the rise of Islamophobia, the expansion of surveillance, and the internal crisis of the liberal world order. Focusing primarily on Afghanistan as the most direct and enduring site of the “response” to

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (London: Verso, 2002), 1–4.

² Jonathan Matusitz, *Symbolism in Terrorism: Motivation, Communication, and Behavior* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 15–18.

³ Philip Bobbitt, *Terror and Consent: The Wars for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 22–26.

⁴ Mark Neocleous, *Critique of Security* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 1–6.

⁵ Siniša Malešević, “Cultural and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Terrorism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism*, ed. Erica Chenoweth et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 178–81.

⁶ Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 45–48.

⁷ James Bamford, *A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq, and the Abuse of America’s Intelligence Agencies* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 3–6.

9/11, we aim to demonstrate how the “war on terror” reproduced new forms of ethnocentrism, propaganda, the construction of the enemy image,⁸ and novel modalities of warfare, control, and governance. Despite the extensive literature on securitization, media discourse, and post-9/11 geopolitics, a significant gap remains in understanding how symbolic violence, cultural production, and security practices interact as a unified system of governance. Existing approaches tend to analyze these domains in isolation, overlooking the integrative mechanisms by which political power is reproduced across the military, cultural, and media spheres. This unified system operates through what may be termed a recursive loop of securitization: political power generates a state of exception, which is then culturally normalized through media to manufacture the public consent necessary to sustain that very exception. In this framework, symbolic violence becomes the essential infrastructure that allows material violence to be exercised without traditional democratic friction.

This article addresses the following research question: How did the events of September 11, 2001, facilitate the transformation of a discrete act of violence into a sustained global system of symbolic, cultural, and political control?

The central hypothesis of this study is that 9/11 functioned not merely as a security crisis, but as a catalytic event that enabled the consolidation of a long-term governance model grounded in the construction of an “indefinite enemy,” the normalization of the state of exception, and the expansion of cultural mechanisms—such as media and video games—that serve to reproduce and legitimize hegemonic power. This article advances the claim that 9/11 operated as a form of symbolic violence that enabled the ritualized production of political order, wherein practices of warfare, media representation, and identity construction became mutually constitutive, institutionalizing a permanent state of exception and transforming liberal governance into a culturally reproduced system of hegemonic control, extending security governance beyond conventional institutional limits.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach grounded in political and cultural anthropology. It combines discourse analysis, case-based examination, and critical media analysis to explore how symbolic structures of power are constructed and reproduced. The aim is to identify patterns, narratives, and mechanisms that link cultural production to broader transformations in global governance, rather than to establish direct causality.

⁸ Joseba Zulaika and William A. Douglass, *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 17–22.

The Selection of Afghanistan as the Primary Target of the Counterterrorism War

Following the September 11 terrorist attacks, the US swiftly launched Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan to dismantle the Taliban regime, which had provided sanctuary to al-Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin Laden. The legal foundation for this action was the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) enacted on September 14, 2001,⁹ which many legal scholars and critics viewed as stretching or reinterpreting existing norms of international law.

From the standpoint of political anthropology, Afghanistan was selected not solely for strategic reasons but also as a site for a ritualistic act of cultural retribution, juxtaposing—in a manner reminiscent of Said’s *Orientalism* and Mamdani’s critiques—the “savage” Orient against the “civilized” West.¹⁰ This intervention reproduced colonial narratives, disregarding local tribal structures and identities,¹¹ while the underlying motivation was the restoration of American hegemony and its punitive persona. Media representations and narratives increasingly reflected and reinforced Islamophobia and symbolic violence—through channels including video games, films, and memes—grounded in constructions of identity, power relations, and discourses.

The counterterrorism war introduced the notion of an “indefinite enemy”¹²—networked, diffuse groups operating without fixed boundaries.¹³ The strategy relied on preventive strikes, generating profound ethical and legal dilemmas, including human rights violations, indeterminate targeting, and the expansion of state power in ways evocative of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*.¹⁴ This approach fundamentally altered the post-war global order by institutionalizing hybrid warfare and “special operations” conducted without formal declarations of war. Between 2018 and 2020, US counterterrorism operations reportedly extended to 85 countries.¹⁵

⁹ Authorization for Use of Military Force, Public Law 107-40, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 115 (2001): 224.

¹⁰ Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 17–24.

¹¹ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 235–40.

¹² Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 21–26.

¹³ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 287–90.

¹⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* [Левифан] (St. Petersburg: Azbooka [Азбука], 2021), 5–6.

¹⁵ Stephanie Savell, “United States Counterterrorism Operations, 2018–2020,” *Costs of War Project* (Providence, RI: Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown

This policy has been seen as fracturing cohesion within the global West¹⁶ and encouraging other states, such as Russia in Chechnya¹⁷ and China vis-à-vis the Uyghurs,¹⁸ to instrumentalize the threat of terrorism for domestic repression and disproportionate force. Among these cases, the Russian experience in Chechnya provides a particularly illustrative example, where counterterrorism discourse was used to legitimize extensive military operations and internal repression, especially during the Second Chechen War (1999–2009). Framing the conflict as part of a broader struggle against terrorism, Russian state narratives portrayed Chechen insurgents as elements of a global extremist network, thereby justifying large-scale security measures and the centralization of state power. This indicates that the post-9/11 security paradigm was adapted rather than simply adopted across political systems, accelerating the global diffusion of shared governance logics. A comparable dynamic can be observed in China, particularly in relation to Xinjiang, where state authorities have framed Uyghur populations and separatist movements within the discourse of global terrorism. This framing has been used to legitimize extensive surveillance systems, re-education campaigns, and securitized governance practices, often justified as necessary measures to maintain stability and counter extremism.

Similarly, in the Indian context, counterterrorism narratives have been mobilized in relation to Kashmir and broader Hindu–Muslim tensions, where security discourses have reinforced majoritarian political agendas. In such cases, the distinction between counterterrorism and internal political control becomes increasingly blurred, further illustrating how the post-9/11 paradigm has been selectively adapted to local political contexts.

In parallel, conspiracy narratives emerged, including LIHOP (“Let It Happen on Purpose,” positing US foreknowledge and acquiescence) and MIHOP (“Made It Happen on Purpose,” alleging orchestration), reflecting a profound crisis of trust¹⁹ and a critique of hegemony. Notably, this line of reasoning recalls dystopian motifs in George Orwell’s 1984, where a character suggests that attacks on London, and

University, February 2021), 1–9, <https://costsofwar.watson.brown.edu/paper/united-states-counterterrorism-operations-2018-2020>.

¹⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Divided West* [Расколотый Запад] (Moscow: Ves Mir [Весь Мир], 2008), 7.

¹⁷ Alexander Litvinenko and Yuri Felshtinsky, *Blowing Up Russia: The Secret Plot to Bring Back KGB Terror* (London: Gibson Square, 2007), 109–18.

¹⁸ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 61–67.

¹⁹ Jonathan Kay, *Among the Truthers: A Journey Through America’s Growing Conspiracist Underground* (New York: Harper, 2011), 12–18.

the war itself, are state-orchestrated constructs intended to sustain an enduring external enemy image and maintain continuous mass mobilization. In other words, external war functions as governmental propaganda and internal terrorism.²⁰ As of 2025, 9/11 continues to be invoked by critics as a key instrument for justifying hegemonic expansion, although direct evidence of orchestration remains absent.

Liberalism challenges this logic by questioning how threats are constructed and scaled, as well as the internal crises they generate, thereby reshaping philosophical debates on the relations between state, individual, and society. Collectively, these developments reconfigure global security, deepening crises and pervasive fear.

It must be emphasized, however, that the choice of Afghanistan was driven not only by cultural-psychological factors but also by cold political calculations. In 2001, Afghanistan was designated as the primary target of the counterterrorism war not merely due to the aforementioned circumstances but as a result of specific legal, political, and strategic calculations. At the time, neither Iraq, Syria, nor any other state could be credibly linked to the September 11 attacks. This choice enabled the US to pursue immediate retribution while simultaneously advancing longer-term hegemonic objectives.

Afghanistan was the sole country that directly harbored the architects of 9/11. The attacks were planned and directed from Afghan territory, where the operatives also trained (despite 15 of the 19 hijackers being Saudi nationals). Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden resided in Afghanistan under Taliban hospitality and protection. The country hosted al-Qaeda's principal training camps (such as al-Farooq and Khalid), where operatives from across the globe were trained.²¹ The physical presence of these camps provided the tangible evidence required to ground a highly abstract war in a specific, conquerable geography. While al-Qaeda functioned as a decentralized, networked entity, the US military-political apparatus required a localized target to perform its ritual of retribution. By focusing on these training sites, the administration presented a clear mission to the public involving the measurable destruction of infrastructure and the seizing of territory. This spatialization of the threat allowed for a traditional military campaign to be used against a non-traditional enemy. It bridged the gap between the elusive nature of transnational terrorism and the conventional capabilities of a state-based superpower. The Tali-

²⁰ George Orwell, 1984 [1984] (Yerevan: Antares, 2012), 161.

²¹ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 456–60.

ban, controlling approximately 90 percent of the country in 2001, refused to extradite bin Laden even after a US demand on September 21, 2001.²²

The Infeasibility of Targeting Iraq or Saudi Arabia and the Strategic Primacy of Afghanistan

Targeting Iraq or, for instance, Saudi Arabia proved politically and strategically unfeasible. In 2001, Saddam Hussein's Iraq had no proven links to al-Qaeda or the September 11 attacks. US intelligence agencies did not assert Iraqi involvement at the time; such assertions emerged only in 2002–2003, predicated on allegations regarding weapons of mass destruction and al-Qaeda links that were later widely discredited. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 constituted a secondary and distinct decision, driven by oil interests, regional dominance, and other geopolitical objectives.

A comparable tension between symbolic representation and normative legitimacy is identified in Jürgen Habermas' prominent essay entitled "Interpreting the Fall of a Monument," where the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue is interpreted as a moment of powerful visual re-signification that transformed global perceptions of the Iraq War. While the image of liberation generated immediate moral resonance, it simultaneously obscured the underlying illegality of the intervention under international law. Habermas argues that such symbolic events produce an affective reordering of political judgment, in which the "normative force of the factual" risks displacing legal and institutional criteria of legitimacy. Crucially, he identifies in the post-9/11 period the emergence of a new doctrinal logic, whereby hegemonic power claims the authority to unilaterally impose a liberal order in the absence or failure of multilateral legal frameworks. This shift marks a departure from the cosmopolitan project embedded in the United Nations system and reflects a broader transformation in global governance, in which symbolic acts of liberation and security increasingly function to legitimize exceptional measures. In this sense, the politics of representation becomes inseparable from the institutionalization of the state of exception, reinforcing the recursive dynamic through which security practices are simultaneously justified, normalized, and reproduced.²³

There was likewise no credible basis for attributing responsibility for the attacks to Saudi Arabia. Although the majority of the hijackers were Saudi nationals, Saudi Arabia remained one of the United States' closest allies, the principal supplier of oil, and a guarantor of regional stability. Attacking Saudi Arabia would have risked losing access to approximately 25 percent of global oil supplies and disman-

²² Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 500–505.

²³ Jürgen Habermas, "Interpreting the Fall of a Monument," *German Law Journal* 4, no. 7 (2003): 701–8. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2071832200016345>.

ting the entire Middle Eastern alliance network. Politically and strategically, such an action was deemed untenable both domestically and internationally. Instead, the US exerted internal pressure (leading Saudi Arabia to crack down on Wahhabi extremists). Moreover, at the international level, US credibility would have been severely compromised had a key ally been implicated in the attacks. Saudi Arabia, as a longstanding US ally, was politically positioned in a way that made direct implication as a “terrorist state” untenable. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia itself was a target of al-Qaeda (bin Laden harbored deep animosity toward the royal family). For the US, Saudi Arabia served not only as the primary oil supplier but also as the principal counterweight to Iran in the region.

Pakistan, unlike Saudi Arabia, might have appeared more “convenient” for counterterrorism operations (particularly given the ISI’s documented support for the Taliban and al-Qaeda). However, it was an official ally possessing nuclear weapons. An invasion risked triggering a regional war or even nuclear escalation. In Pakistan’s case, the US opted for allied status, applying pressure while compelling General Musharraf to align: on September 13, 2001, he granted airspace access, logistical support, and intelligence sharing. In both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, a multiplicity of political factors rendered their inclusion among the entities accountable for September 11 highly inadvisable and psychologically perilous. Afghanistan thus emerged as the most feasible and least politically costly target.

Afghanistan was framed as a “haven for terrorists threatening global security,”²⁴ a “failed state” lacking a functioning army, central authority, or international legitimacy.²⁵ Intervention there elicited minimal political resistance. The Taliban regime was perceived as the “easiest target”—internationally isolated and radically Islamist. Afghanistan was widely regarded as a strategically permissive environment, characterized by limited conventional military resistance and the absence of effective air defense systems.

In the initial months, US and NATO forces occupied the country with relatively limited organized resistance from the Taliban and allied forces. Beyond its role as a terrorist sanctuary, Afghanistan constituted the geostrategic “heart” of Eurasia. Control over Afghanistan offered a multidimensional strategic advantage, enabling influence over Central Asian energy corridors, the projection of pressure toward Iran and China, oversight of Pakistan’s northwestern frontier, and a geostrategic position adjacent to Russia’s “soft underbelly” in Central Asia. Within this frame-

²⁴ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 61–67.

²⁵ Georges Balandier, *Political Anthropology* [Политическая антропология] (Moscow: Nauchny Mir [Научный мир], 2001), 121–52.

work, US policymakers remained attentive to enduring Russian and Chinese interests in Afghanistan, and the containment of any potential reassertion of Russian influence was consistently framed as a strategic imperative.

The geostrategic and positional factors in selecting Afghanistan had been paramount and openly discussed among American political and military elites since the late 1990s. Afghanistan's location is exceptionally advantageous: to the north lie Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan (former Soviet republics); to the west, Iran; to the east, China (Xinjiang and the Wakhan Corridor); to the south, Pakistan, bordering Kashmir and proximate to India. Before 9/11, American geopolitical discourse, drawing on Zbigniew Brzezinski, Project for the New American Century, and RAND Corporation analyses, increasingly conceptualized Afghanistan as a pivotal gateway to Central Asian energy corridors, particularly projected Caspian Sea–Pakistan and Indian Ocean pipeline routes intended to circumvent Russian and Iranian influence. Within this framework, Afghanistan was simultaneously envisioned as an instrument for destabilizing the geopolitical buffer between Russia and China and as a strategically optimal location for the establishment of enduring US military installations, including Bagram, Shindand, and Kandahar. In *The Grand Chessboard* (1997), Zbigniew Brzezinski argues: “Afghanistan could become the beginning of the Eurasian Balkans... whoever controls that territory can influence the entire Eurasian continent.”²⁶

Thus, Afghanistan was chosen not solely because bin Laden was harbored there, but because it was the only country where the US could simultaneously initiate a counterterrorism war and establish a long-term strategic presence at the center of Eurasia²⁷—in the rear of Russia, China, and Iran.²⁸ In this sense, some analysts interpret 9/11 as having provided a “perfect justification” for long-standing strategic initiatives formulated in the 1990s, particularly those associated with PNAC. When the US withdrew in 2021, that overarching strategic project effectively collapsed.

The US fully exploited 9/11 as a “blank check” to advance its long-range strategic objectives—a reality now acknowledged in American political science as the “9/11 enabling event” or “the new Pearl Harbor” (as articulated in the 2000 PNAC report).²⁹ Concrete illustrations include Paul Wolfowitz's statement on the evening of September 11, 2001, suggesting that “now we can do what was previously im-

²⁶ Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 124–25.

²⁷ Balandier, *Political Anthropology*, 31–55.

²⁸ Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 148–50.

²⁹ Project for the New American Century, *Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century* (Washington, DC: Project for the New American Century, 2000), 50–51.

possible,”³⁰ and Donald Rumsfeld's internal memorandum on September 20, 2001, urging officials to “sweep it all up, things related and not,” reflecting an approach that extended beyond al-Qaeda to Iraq, Iran, and the broader region.³¹

New Forms of Propaganda: Media as an Instrument of Cultural Hegemony

Whereas twentieth-century broadcast media primarily cultivated a passive spectator, the early twenty-first century witnessed the weaponization of video games as an interactive, immersive vanguard in the global cultural war.³² In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the US Pentagon recognized interactive entertainment as the most effective means to militarize younger generations and reinforce the already declared “image of the enemy,” thereby weakening domestic resistance and consolidating public support. This gave rise to the “military-entertainment complex,” a system in which military institutions and the gaming industry collaborate to create virtual spaces that reproduce discourses of global hegemony.³³

Political anthropology permits an examination of video games and media as ritualistic instruments³⁴ that enable players to “participate” in war without real-world consequences, while simultaneously shaping their identity or at least their situational self-perception as “civilized” heroes combating “savage” adversaries. This ritual is grounded in constructions of identity: the player assumes the role of a “white savior” who brings “civilization” to territories, such as Afghanistan or Iraq, in virtual environments. Such games not only reflect Islamophobia but have been argued to actively contribute to it through stereotypes that deepen ethnocentrism and cultural othering.

Concrete examples illustrate this dynamic. Released on July 4, 2002, to capitalize on the patriotic symbolism of Independence Day, *America's Army* was introduced by the Army as a free game³⁵ and served as an official recruitment instrument, with development costs increasing from approximately \$7 million to nearly \$33 million by 2009. Players did not merely shoot; they learned rules, issued and followed commands, and engaged opponents invariably depicted with Middle

³⁰ James Bamford, *A Pretext for War*, 287–90.

³¹ Bamford, *A Pretext for War*, 310–15.

³² Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 45–52.

³³ Tanner Mirrlees and Taha Ibaid, “The Virtual Killing of Muslims: Digital War Games, Islamophobia, and the Global War on Terror,” *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 6, no. 1 (2021): 33–51.

³⁴ Mirrlees and Ibaid, “The Virtual Killing of Muslims,” 33–51.

³⁵ Matthew Thomas Payne, *Playing War: Military Video Games After 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 12–18.

Eastern features—turbans, beards, Arabic or Arabic-sounding shouts directly associated with Islam. As the first state-funded video game explicitly designed for military recruitment and cultural dominance, it marked a novel intersection of propaganda and entertainment.

On a larger scale, the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* trilogy (2007–2011: *Modern Warfare 2*, *Modern Warfare 3*) and the *Black Ops* series sold over 150 million copies. In these titles, the “enemy” almost invariably bore Middle Eastern characteristics, with Arabic dialogue predominating and terrorists frequently uttering “Allahu Akbar” during attacks.³⁶ Existing research in media and game studies suggests that such games frequently construct terrorist figures through Arab or Muslim imagery, while positioning players within the perspective of US special forces or allied actors; in this process, political context is often reduced or abstracted, reframing war as a largely “technical” struggle between “good” and “evil.”³⁷ The game world is presented as pre-constituted and unquestionable, and player actions are framed not as mere military commands but as “missions,” subtly reinforcing a near-sacred duty at the subconscious level.³⁸

These games did not merely reflect Islamophobic narratives; rather, they can be understood as contributing to the reinforcement and normalization of such representations through repeated exposure to simplified and stereotypical enemy images. Millions of young people (primarily aged 12–25) spent tens of thousands of hours eliminating “Arab” characters, which, although virtual, may contribute to the formation of cognitive associations linking Muslim identity with perceived threat. From a cultural anthropological perspective, this exemplifies how entertainment functions as a ritualistic tool to prepare new generations for “perpetual war.” The ritual relies on identity construction: the player becomes a Western hero battling a “savage” culture depicted as inhuman, incomprehensible, and perpetually aggressive. This binary construction is reinforced through the silencing of the adversary. In these interactive spaces, the enemy is rarely granted a voice, a history, or a motive beyond a generic hatred for Western freedom. By stripping the opponent of their humanity and political agency, the media ensures that the player's violence

³⁶ Vít Šisler, “Video Games, Video Clips, and Islam: New Media and the Communication of Values,” in *Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption*, ed. Johanna Pink (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 241–45.

³⁷ Frédéric Gagnon, “Invading Your Hearts and Minds: *Call of Duty* and the (Re)Writing of Militarism in U.S. Digital Games and Popular Culture,” *European Journal of American Studies* 5, no. 3 (2010).

³⁸ Cori E. Dauber et al., “Call of Duty: Jihad—How the Video Game Motif Has Migrated Downstream from Islamic State Propaganda Videos,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 3 (2019): 17–31.

remains a moral necessity. This lack of narrative depth for the Other mirrors the broader political discourse of the era. Much of that discourse dismissed the root causes of anti-Western sentiment to focus on a simplified battle between civilization and its discontents.

While the causal relationship between media consumption and attitudinal change remains debated, a growing body of empirical research in media psychology and communication suggests that repeated exposure to stereotypical representations can reinforce existing biases.³⁹ Such exposure has been associated with measurable increases in implicit associations between specific cultural or religious identities and perceived threat—often estimated at 10–30 percent, particularly among younger and highly engaged audiences. In this context, video games should not be understood as producing prejudice in a strictly deterministic manner, but rather as participating in a broader ecosystem of cultural reproduction in which existing narratives are normalized, amplified, and internalized.

Video games also operated as forms of “virtual recolonization.”⁴⁰ On maps representing Afghanistan or Iraq, players could “capture,” “clear,” or “police” villages and markets without any political or cultural context. Such mechanics reproduced colonial narratives, positioning the player as a “white savior” bringing “civilization” to “savage” spaces portrayed as deserts, filthy streets, and ruined cities filled with extremists and chaos.⁴¹ For two decades, gaming environments offered a sanitized realm where American power remained invincible, serving as a psychological counterweight to the military's gradual loss of legitimacy and the Taliban's steady resurgence. This digital invincibility functioned as a form of cultural insurance against the mounting failures of the kinetic war. Even as the situation in Helmand or Kandahar grew increasingly precarious, the virtual American soldier remained a paragon of efficiency and technological grace. This disconnect between the pixelated victory and the geopolitical stalemate allowed the domestic public to maintain a sense of national pride and purpose. It buffered the political establishment from the immediate consequences of its strategic errors. The virtual space became a laboratory for a perfect war where the objectives were always clear and the moral outcome was certain.

When the actual intervention collapsed within weeks in 2021, the glaring dissonance between geopolitical reality and triumphant digital narratives laid bare the core function of the military-entertainment complex. Rather than merely compen-

³⁹ Tanner Mirrlees and Taha Ibaid, “The Virtual Killing of Muslims,” 33–51.

⁴⁰ James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 102–8.

⁴¹ Der Derian, *Virtuous War*, 85–92.

sating for military defeat on the ground, video game propaganda operated as an enduring instrument of cultural warfare, deeply embedding Islamophobic frameworks of dominance and othering into global consciousness.⁴² The material consequences of this digital othering extend far beyond the screen, manifesting in the systemic alienation of Muslim communities, a documented proliferation of anti-Muslim hate crimes, and the reciprocal radicalization of insurgent factions reacting to Western neo-colonialism.⁴³

Anthropologically, these games produce a militarized identity in new generations while reproducing global ethnocentrism,⁴⁴ wherein Islamic culture is construed as a “dangerous other” and Western culture as the “benevolent savior.” This discourse directly aligns with the PNAC hegemonic project, with games functioning as its cultural arm, legitimizing the “war on terror” in young minds. Video game narratives can be regarded as a cultural extension or continuation of the Afghan intervention, achieving virtual victory where real defeat occurred. This leads to an analysis of hegemonic crisis, in which PNAC’s “new Pearl Harbor” ultimately became the symbol of the very crisis it helped engender.

Similar Dynamics in Film Production

A comparable process is observable in film production, where the post-9/11 period witnessed a surge of counterterrorism action films that not only justified American interventions but also constructed character archetypes in which adversary and ally identities are shaped not by race or religion per se, but by civilizational and political choice. In other words, the “bad” figure is not inherently the Arab/Muslim, but the one who rejects the American order; the “good” is the one who accepts allied status (often as a “little brother”) and assists American heroes. This representational strategy enables such films to preempt accusations of racism through the inclusion of “positive” Muslim characters, yet this positivity is structurally conditional upon their alignment with US authority, thereby transforming apparent inclusion into a mechanism for reproducing ethnocentrism as a form of civilizational hegemony. For instance, in *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), which depicts the hunt for bin Laden, Muslim CIA assets assist American protagonists, but they remain secondary figures lacking substantive development. The film emphasizes that “bad Arabs” are

⁴² Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca L. Stein, *Digital Militarism: Israel's Occupation in the Social Media Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 88–94.

⁴³ Dauber et al., “Call of Duty: Jihad,” 17–31.

⁴⁴ Tanner Mirrlees and Taha Ibaid, “The Virtual Killing of Muslims,” 33–51.

precisely those who refuse cooperation with the US.⁴⁵ Similarly, in *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *American Sniper* (2014), Iraqi children and women are frequently portrayed as potential threats, while “good” Muslims appear solely as helpers who accept the American order. These constructions reproduce colonial narratives in which the Other is “good” only when subordinated to the hegemon, and “bad” when resistant.⁴⁶

By cloaking racial prejudices in the rhetoric of civilizational alignment, these media properties deflect accusations of Islamophobia; they achieve this by deploying “positive” Muslim characters—such as Nadia Yassir in the television series 24—whose inclusion is structurally marginalized and strictly contingent upon their service to the state. At their core, however, they reinforce that “goodness” is contingent upon loyalty to the American system.⁴⁷ Such characters are routinely cast as “little brothers”—assistants who support the American hero but never assume the lead role. This representational strategy sanitizes the conflict, substituting overt racial or religious animus with a discourse of “civilizational choice” that enforces a rigid binary: total assimilation into Western liberal-capitalist paradigms or relegation to the “axis of evil.”

This model was not confined to American media narratives; it was emulated globally, becoming a standard template for propaganda worldwide. In Russian films (e.g., *Brother 2* and *War*, both 2002), “bad” Chechens or Ukrainians are those who reject the Russian “big brother,” mirroring the American concept of the “loyal Other.”⁴⁸ In Chinese cinema (the *Wolf Warrior* series, 2015–2019), “bad” Uyghurs or Hong Kongers are depicted as disloyal to Beijing, reproducing the same constructions.⁴⁹ In Indian popular cinema, antagonistic Pakistani characters are frequently hyper-Islamized to signify terrorist threats, whereas “good” Muslim characters are defined strictly by their subservience to the Indian state and its protagonists.⁵⁰

This pattern of emulation contributed to a broader global circulation of media representations that frame terrorism through national security lenses in which each

⁴⁵ Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 55–61.

⁴⁶ Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2001), 210–15.

⁴⁷ Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, 201–10.

⁴⁸ Stephen M. Norris, *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: Movies, Memory, and Patriotism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 88–94.

⁴⁹ Sheena Chestnut Greitens, “Dealing with Demand for China’s Global Surveillance Exports” (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, April 2020), 33–39.

⁵⁰ K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change*, 2nd ed. (Stoke-on-Trent, UK: Trentham Books, 2004), 142–48.

state constructs its own “terrorist” as an alien, savage force, thereby reinforcing domestic nationalism and intensifying worldwide othering. Consequently, 9/11 became not merely an American but a global cultural trauma, the reverberations of which persist into 2025. Although the direct impact of such representations on audience attitudes remains contested, research in media effects increasingly emphasizes their cumulative and structural rather than immediate effects: repeated exposure to simplified civilizational binaries may not directly determine attitudes, but it can gradually sediment in-group/out-group cognitive distinctions and normalize security-oriented frameworks of perception. In this sense, film functions as a complementary cultural medium through which hegemonic narratives acquire cultural form, achieve repetition, and circulate across global audiences.

Conclusion

The September 11 terrorist attacks are frequently presented as the “beginning” or a “sharp turning point” in global politics. However, a political-anthropological framework reframes these attacks not as an initial cause, but as a violent catalyst that ruptured pre-existing fault lines within liberal hegemony, security, and identity.⁵¹

The war in Afghanistan emerged as the most protracted and paradigmatic manifestation of this hegemonic crisis.⁵² It demonstrated that technological superiority and military might are insufficient to reshape complex cultural, social, and political systems. Simultaneously, the war evolved from a strictly geographic struggle into a pervasive cultural project.⁵³ By weaponizing broadcast media, video games, and political discourse, the establishment forged a stable image of the “invisible enemy,” thereby securing the indefinite prolongation of the state of exception and justifying an expansive apparatus of domestic control.

In this sense, the “war on terror” transformed from the neutralization of a specific threat into a novel modality of governance, in which the discourse of security superseded law, liberty, and democratic oversight.⁵⁴ The liberal world order, ostensibly universal in norm, began to operate according to logics of exception, selective

⁵¹ Arnold Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial* (Yerevan, 2013), 331.

⁵² Peter L. Bergen, *Manhunt: The Ten-Year Search for Bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad* (New York: Crown, 2012), 179–85.

⁵³ Der Derian, *Virtuous War*, 115–22.

⁵⁴ Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003), 112–16.

rights, and cultural alienation, thereby deepening the very contradictions it purportedly sought to overcome.⁵⁵

The post-9/11 world revealed that hegemony is sustained not solely by arms but by narratives, images, and symbolic practices.⁵⁶ The Afghan intervention, coupled with its virtual reflections in cultural production, attests that crises of political power are frequently compensated through cultural overproduction. Ultimately, this cultural overproduction fails to reconcile the structural contradictions of the hegemonic crisis, serving instead to postpone their inevitable eruption. The collapse of the Afghan mission in 2021 acted as the definitive breaking point for this postponement. The material failure of the intervention could no longer be obscured by the symbolic success of its media representations. This moment of rupture revealed that a unipolar order cannot indefinitely maintain a state of exception when the ground reality consistently contradicts its foundational myths. The resulting crisis of credibility has left the liberal world order in a state of ideological exhaustion. It now struggles to find a new narrative to replace the framework of the Global War on Terror. That being said, rather than receding into the past as a discrete historical event, 9/11 operates as a perpetual cultural trauma that continually reproduces the logics of global securitization and systemic othering. Thus, the US-led liberal hegemony reconstituted itself by fusing coercive and cultural mechanisms of power, producing a governance model grounded in permanent exception, diffuse surveillance, and the continuous reproduction of an externalized threat necessary for its own stabilization. 9/11 did not simply trigger a war on terror; it enabled the emergence of a self-reinforcing system in which security practices, cultural narratives, and media representations collectively normalized permanent exception and reconfigured the liberal order.

The contribution of this study lies in its integrative framework, which brings together political anthropology, security studies, and media analysis to demonstrate how symbolic violence, cultural production, and institutional practices operate as a unified system. Unlike securitization theory, which primarily focuses on discursive constructions of threat within political institutions, this approach emphasizes the role of cultural and interactive media in reproducing and stabilizing those constructions at the level of everyday experience and identity formation. In doing so, it highlights the cultural dimension of global governance as a central, rather than secondary, component of hegemonic power. In this light, the post-9/11 order reveals a fundamental disjunction between symbolic legitimacy and legal validity. As the

⁵⁵ Richard Falk, *The Costs of War: International Law, the UN, and World Order after Iraq* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 59.

⁵⁶ Project for the New American Century, *Rebuilding America's Defenses*, 12–18.

analysis suggests, visually and emotionally powerful representations of “liberation” can reframe political judgment and generate public consent, yet they cannot substitute for the normative constraints of international law. The increasing reliance on such symbolic acts to justify intervention reflects a broader shift toward hegemonic unilateralism, in which the authority to define and enforce order is detached from multilateral legal frameworks. This dynamic reinforces the institutionalization of the state of exception, demonstrating that the durability of contemporary security governance depends not only on material power, but on the continual alignment of symbolic narratives with practices of control.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The authors affirm that this research did not involve human subjects.

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SOUTHERN AFRICA IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD: EXTERNAL POWER COMPETITION AND REGIONAL AGENCY

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Abstract

Southern Africa has become an increasingly important arena in global politics as the world shifts toward a multipolar order. Multipolarity expands Southern Africa's diplomatic options but not its structural economic agency, producing a form of conditional agency constrained by enduring global economic hierarchies. Considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding how countries in this region navigate the growing influence of external powers—China, the United States, the European Union (EU), Russia, and BRICS. This article examines how Southern African states balance external pressures with their own regional and national priorities, drawing on qualitative case studies from selected SADC member states. The analysis shows that while engagement with multiple global actors offers Southern African states opportunities to expand their diplomatic and economic options, structural constraints such as dependence on foreign aid, weak regional coordination, and uneven power relations often limit their ability to act independently. This article argues that Southern Africa's ability to exercise meaningful agency in a multipolar world relies on stronger regional institutions and better coordination among member states. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of African agency and regionalism, highlighting both the challenges and possibilities for Southern African states in shaping their own regional environment.

Keywords: *Southern Africa, Multipolarity, Regional Agency, South-South Cooperation, Multi-alignment, Great Power Competition.*

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Introduction

Southern Africa's engagement with a multipolar international order demonstrates that while the diffusion of global power expands states' diplomatic maneuverability, it does not translate into structural economic agency, as enduring hierarchies in global finance, trade, and production continue to constrain transformative development outcomes. The rise of multiple centers of power and the gradual erosion of the US-dominated post-Cold War unipolar order, and the shift toward multipolarity, have significant implications for Africa, and particularly for Southern Africa, a region historically shaped by colonial legacies, Cold War interventions, and long-standing dependence on foreign aid.¹ While scholars have extensively examined Africa's engagement with individual external powers such as China or the US, comparatively less attention has been paid to how Southern African states navigate simultaneous pressures from multiple actors and exercise agency within these dynamics.²

Southern Africa occupies a strategic position in global politics because it is rich in natural resources, hosts key maritime routes, and has long been a site of political contestation.³ Over the past two decades, the region has witnessed intensified engagement from traditional Western actors, emerging powers such as China and Russia, and multilateral groupings like BRICS, all competing for influence through diplomacy, investment, and security cooperation.⁴ These interactions provide Southern African states with new opportunities to diversify partnerships and leverage relations with multiple external actors for economic and strategic gain. However, they also present challenges, including dependence, uneven bargaining power, and the risk of fragmented regional coordination.⁵

The concept of African agency has emerged as a critical lens that helps explain the continent's responses to global pressures. Rather than being passive recipients of external influence, African states actively navigate complex international dynamics, using both national policy tools and regional institutions to pursue stra-

¹ G. John Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal World Order?" *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 7–10.

² Chris Alden and Daniel Large, "China's Exceptionalism and the Challenges of Multipolarity in Africa," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2015): 317–35.

³ Alois S. Mlambo, "BRICS and Africa: Reassessing the South–South Cooperation Framework," *African Affairs* 119, no. 477 (2020): 1–23.

⁴ Lucy Corkin, "Uncovering African Agency: Angola and China's Resource-for-Infrastructure Deals," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 31, no. 2 (2013): 191–210.

⁵ Paul D. Williams, "African Agency in Peace Operations: Concepts and Evidence," *International Peacekeeping* 23, no. 2 (2016): 163–87.

tegic interests.⁶ In Southern Africa, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) serves as a key platform for regional coordination by providing mechanisms for collective bargaining, conflict management, and policy harmonization.⁷ Yet the effectiveness of SADC is constrained by institutional weaknesses, divergent national priorities, and varying levels of economic and political capacity among its member states. From an International Political Economy perspective, multipolarity represents a reconfiguration of external partnerships rather than a transformation of underlying economic structures; consequently, Southern African states gain tactical bargaining power without achieving structural autonomy, as commodity dependence, external finance, and asymmetric interdependence persist.

This study examines how Southern African states navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by a multipolar world. Specifically, it examines the strategies employed by states to balance external pressures with regional and national priorities. It focuses on the following questions: How do Southern African states exercise agency in the face of competing global powers? To what extent do regional institutions, particularly the SADC, enhance or constrain the ability of member states to act strategically? By addressing these questions, this article contributes to the broader literature on African agency, regionalism, and the implications of multipolarity for the Global South, while also offering insights into how Southern Africa can transform external pressures into strategic opportunities.

Theoretical Frameworks

Multipolarity Theory: This framework offers a critical lens for understanding the evolving global order and its implications for regions such as Southern Africa. Traditionally, international relations have been understood through the lenses of bipolarity, typified by the Cold War rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union, and unipolarity, reflected in the post-Cold War predominance of the US.⁸ In contrast, a multipolar system is characterized by multiple major powers, each capable of influencing global outcomes and thereby creating a more complex and competitive international environment.⁹ This diffusion of power fundamentally reshapes

⁶ Tim Murithi, "The African Union's Evolving Role in Peace Operations: Lessons for Africa and the World," *African Security Review* 18, no. 2 (2009): 1–15.

⁷ Gilbert M. Khadiagala, "Regional Organizations and Peacebuilding in Africa," in *Peacebuilding and Regional Dynamics*, ed. Michael Lund and Roger Mac Ginty (London: Routledge, 2013), 87–106.

⁸ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

⁹ Charles A. Kupchan, *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

the strategic options available to regional actors, including states in Southern Africa, by providing alternative sources of economic, political, and security support.

The relevance of multipolarity for Southern Africa is particularly evident in the growing presence of actors such as China, the US, the EU, Russia, and BRICS. Within this evolving multipolar context, Southern African states are no longer forced to engage primarily with a single hegemon. Instead, they can diversify their diplomatic and economic partnerships, negotiating agreements and aid arrangements with multiple external powers simultaneously.¹⁰ This diversification enhances the agency of Southern African states, allowing them to pursue national and regional interests while mitigating overreliance on any single external actor.

At the same time, multipolarity introduces a range of challenges that complicate the exercise of agency. Competing pressures from multiple powers can generate conflicting expectations, produce new forms of dependence, and intensify internal and regional coordination challenges.¹¹ For instance, while engagement with China may bring infrastructure investment and trade opportunities, it may also increase vulnerability to debt dependence and reduce states' leverage in their relations with other partners, such as the US or the EU.¹² In this context, multipolarity presents Southern African states with both opportunities and constraints, highlighting the importance of strategic diplomacy, coherent national policies, and effective regional institutions such as the SADC.

Conditional Agency in a Multipolar Order: This article argues that multipolarity expands diplomatic maneuverability for Southern African states but does not fundamentally transform their structural economic position in the global economy. Between 2008 and 2024, the diffusion of global power has enabled greater diversification of external partnerships and strategic balancing; however, the persistence of extractive trade models and commodity dependence constrains the translation of diplomatic flexibility into structural economic agency. In short, multipolarity widens tactical room for maneuver while leaving structural hierarchies largely intact.

From an International Political Economy perspective, agency must be disaggregated into two distinct dimensions: diplomatic agency and structural economic agency. Diplomatic agency refers to the ability of states to diversify partnerships, negotiate among competing powers, and leverage multilateral institutions to enhance bargaining power. Structural economic agency, by contrast, refers to the ca-

¹⁰ Alden and Large, "China's Exceptionalism," 317–35.

¹¹ Williams, "African Agency in Peace Operations," 163–87.

¹² Deborah Bräutigam, *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

capacity to alter a state's position within global value chains, diversify production, and escape patterns of primary commodity dependence.

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, the rise of China, India, Brazil, and a resurgent Russia has significantly expanded diplomatic options for Southern African states. The presence of multiple external partners has reduced exclusive reliance on Western donors and enabled governments to engage in forum-shopping and strategic balancing. At the continental level, the African Union (AU) has functioned as an institutional amplifier of bargaining leverage, coordinating summit diplomacy through platforms such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and EU–AU dialogues and embedding negotiations within Agenda 2063's developmental vision.¹³ These mechanisms enhance diplomatic agency by allowing African states to aggregate their preferences and negotiate collectively rather than bilaterally.

Similarly, South–South Cooperation (SSC) and triangular cooperation arrangements have broadened partnership portfolios. Chinese infrastructure financing, Indian pharmaceutical exports and technical training, and Brazilian agricultural cooperation initiatives have diversified development pathways beyond traditional North–South aid hierarchies.¹⁴ Triangular cooperation frameworks, often involving the United Nations or Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) donors and emerging powers, have further institutionalized knowledge exchange and capacity building.¹⁵ These developments support the claim that multipolarity increases diplomatic room for maneuver.

However, the expansion of diplomatic choice has not translated into structural transformation. Trade patterns between Southern Africa and emerging powers continue to reflect classical core–periphery dynamics: primary commodities and raw materials are exported, while manufactured goods and higher-value products are imported.¹⁶ China's trade with Southern Africa, for example, remains heavily concentrated in minerals, energy resources, and agricultural commodities, whereas manufactured imports into the region continue to come predominantly from China.¹⁷ Although infrastructure investments may facilitate long-term development,

¹³ African Union Commission, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want* (Addis Ababa: African Union, 2015).

¹⁴ Emma Mawdsley, *From Recipients to Donors: Emerging Powers and the Changing Development Landscape* (London: Zed Books, 2012); Alden and Large, "China's Exceptionalism," 213–27.

¹⁵ United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC), *South-South and Triangular Cooperation in Action* (New York: United Nations, 2019).

¹⁶ Samir Amin, *Unequal Development* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976).

¹⁷ Bräutigam, *The Dragon's Gift*.

they do not automatically alter the region's position within global value chains. The structural composition of trade thus continues to reproduce patterns of dependence even within a multipolar framework.

African Agency Theory: This framework offers an important perspective for understanding the capacity of African states to act strategically in the international system, challenging narratives that portray the continent as passive or solely subject to external influence.¹⁸ While traditional International Relations frameworks often focus on the actions of great powers, African Agency Theory emphasizes that African states and regional institutions actively interpret, negotiate, and respond to external pressures. This approach recognizes that agency is not only exercised at the national level but also collectively through regional mechanisms such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which facilitates coordinated diplomacy, conflict resolution, and policy harmonization among member states.¹⁹

In the context of a multipolar world, African Agency Theory is particularly relevant. The rise of multiple global actors has expanded the range of options available to Southern African states, enabling them to leverage external competition to their advantage.²⁰ For instance, states can simultaneously negotiate development projects, security partnerships, or trade agreements with external powers, thereby enhancing their strategic autonomy. However, agency is not unconstrained; structural factors such as economic dependence, weak regional coordination, and domestic political limitations continue to shape the scope of strategic choice.²¹

African Agency Theory complements Multipolarity Theory by highlighting how Southern African states navigate global power shifts. Whereas Multipolarity Theory explains the structure of the international system and the distribution of power among major actors,²² African Agency Theory focuses on the capacity of regional and national actors to act within these constraints, either by exploiting opportunities presented by competing powers or by mitigating the risks associated with external influence.²³ For example, the SADC's collective diplomatic initiatives can help smaller member states balance pressures from larger external actors, demonstrating that agency is both a national and regional endeavor.

By applying African Agency Theory, this study recognizes Southern African states as active participants in shaping their regional and global environment, rather

¹⁸ Murithi, "The African Union's Evolving Role in Peace Operations," 1–15.

¹⁹ Khadiagala, "Regional Organizations and Peacebuilding in Africa," 87–106.

²⁰ Ian Taylor, *Africa in International Politics: External Powers and the New Scramble* (London: Routledge, 2018).

²¹ Corkin, "Uncovering African Agency," 191–210.

²² Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

²³ Williams, "African Agency in Peace Operations," 163–87.

than passive recipients of foreign influence. It underscores the importance of strategic decision-making, policy innovation, and regional coordination in navigating multipolar competition. Combined with Multipolarity Theory, this framework provides a comprehensive lens to examine how Southern African states exercise agency amid the competing demands of multiple global powers.

International Political Economy and the Structural Boundaries of Southern African Agency in a Multipolar World

The emergence of a multipolar international order has generated renewed optimism regarding African agency, particularly in Southern Africa, where states have increasingly diversified partnerships among Western powers, China, Russia, India, and other emerging actors. Governments across the region frame multipolarity as an opportunity to expand diplomatic autonomy, reduce dependence on traditional Western donors, and leverage competition among major powers for development gains. However, while political rhetoric emphasizes sovereignty, non-alignment, and strategic diversification, the material capacity to implement these aspirations remains constrained. International Political Economy (IPE) provides the most analytically robust framework for explaining this contradiction. By integrating political and economic analysis, IPE reveals how structural hierarchies in the global economy shape and constrain the scope of state agency in the global system.

At its core, IPE rejects the artificial separation of politics and economics in international relations. Robert Gilpin argues that the international political economy is shaped by the reciprocal interaction of state power and market forces, with dominant states constructing and sustaining the rules governing trade, finance, and production.²⁴ In this view, power is embedded not only in military capability but also in the ability to shape global economic structures. Southern African states formally possess sovereignty, yet they operate within an economic system largely structured by advanced industrial economies and global financial institutions. Their integration into global markets is mediated through export dependence, foreign investment inflows, sovereign credit ratings, and access to external finance. These structural features significantly narrow the range of viable domestic policy options.

Strange's concept of structural power further clarifies this dynamic. Strange contends that power in the global system is exercised through control over the structures of finance, production, security, and knowledge.²⁵ Southern African states do not control these structures; rather, they adapt to them. For example, fi-

²⁴ Robert Gilpin, *Global Political Economy: Understanding the International Economic Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

²⁵ Susan Strange, *States and Markets*, 2nd ed. (London: Pinter Publishers, 1994).

nancial markets determine borrowing costs, international institutions influence macroeconomic policy frameworks, and multinational corporations shape production chains. Even in a multipolar context, where new partners such as China provide alternative financing, the fundamental structure of dependence on external capital remains intact. Thus, while multipolarity diversifies external relationships, it does not automatically transform the structural distribution of economic power.

Dependency theory deepens this structural analysis by situating Southern Africa's contemporary position within a historical trajectory of unequal integration. Andre Gunder Frank's notion of "the development of underdevelopment" explains how peripheral economies are incorporated into global capitalism in subordinate ways that reproduce patterns of dependence.²⁶ Similarly, Walter Rodney demonstrates how colonial extraction shaped African economies toward primary commodity exportation and external orientation.²⁷ Southern Africa's contemporary economic profile reflects this continuity. Zambia's copper exports, Mozambique's reliance on extractive industries, and South Africa's dependence on volatile portfolio capital illustrate the persistence of externally oriented growth models. Commodity price fluctuations, global demand shocks, and shifts in international capital flows directly affect fiscal stability and social spending. Consequently, political ambitions such as industrial transformation, welfare expansion, or regional integration must contend with structural vulnerabilities embedded in the global economy.

Liberal IPE perspectives also illuminate the constraints facing Southern Africa, though through a different lens. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's theory of complex interdependence emphasizes that states are mutually connected through trade, finance, and institutions.²⁸ While such interdependence reduces the likelihood of military conflict, it generates asymmetric vulnerability. Southern African economies are more sensitive to disruptions in global commodity markets, credit tightening by major central banks, and changes in development financing conditions than are the advanced economies to which they are linked. This asymmetry limits bargaining power even within cooperative frameworks such as BRICS or South-South partnerships. Interdependence, therefore, does not eliminate hierarchy; rather, it reconfigures it in ways that continue to privilege structurally dominant actors.

²⁶ Andre Gunder Frank, "The Development of Underdevelopment," *Monthly Review* 18, no. 4 (1966): 17–31.

²⁷ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972).

²⁸ Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Power and Interdependence*, 4th ed. (Boston: Longman, 2012).

Multipolarity represents a political reconfiguration unfolding within a largely unchanged global economic structure. While the diffusion of power beyond Western dominance has expanded the diplomatic options of Southern African states, allowing them to engage multiple external partners, diversification does not produce structural autonomy. Chinese, Western, and private financing remain embedded in global financial systems shaped by credit ratings, repayment pressures, and macroeconomic conditionalities, leaving development trajectories tied to external markets and capital flows.

Regional cooperation represents another strategy through which Southern African states seek to enhance collective agency. Institutions such as the SADC and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aim to expand intra-regional trade, harmonize policies, and reduce dependence on extra-regional actors. From an IPE perspective, regionalism can increase bargaining power by enlarging market size and fostering coordinated industrial policy. Yet internal fragmentation, infrastructural deficits, and uneven economic capacities among member states limit the transformative potential of regional integration. Without structural diversification of production and a reduction in dependence on external capital, regionalism can mitigate but not fully overcome global asymmetries.

This theoretical framework thus conceptualizes Southern African agency as conditional rather than absolute. Agency takes the form of diplomatic maneuverability, selective alignment, and negotiated partnerships. However, it operates within structural constraints shaped by historical patterns of unequal exchange, global financial governance, and asymmetric interdependence. Multipolarity expands the arena of competition among external powers, creating opportunities for strategic engagement. Nevertheless, structural hierarchies embedded within the global political economy continue to constrain Southern African autonomy. While multipolarity expands diplomatic space, it has not transformed underlying economic power relations. Persistent global asymmetries temper aspirations for sovereignty, development, and regional autonomy, as these ambitions remain constrained by enduring structural dependencies in the international economic system.

Regionalism and New Regionalism Theory: Regionalism in International Relations refers to the process through which geographically proximate states form cooperative structures to address shared political, economic, and security challenges. Traditional regionalism emphasized formal integration, economic interdependence, and institutionalized cooperation.²⁹ In contrast, New Regionalism Theory

²⁹ Björn Hettne, "Globalization and the New Regionalism: The Second Great Transformation?" in *Theories of New Regionalism*, ed. Fredrik Söderbaum and Timothy Shaw (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 19–41.

(NRT), which emerged in the 1990s, emphasizes that regional cooperation is not solely a response to economic needs but is also shaped by globalization, transnational networks, and the changing international order.³⁰ NRT highlights that regions are embedded in the broader international system and that regional institutions mediate between local and global dynamics.

In Southern Africa, the SADC exemplifies the principles of New Regionalism Theory. The SADC provides a platform for member states to coordinate economic, political, and security policies, allowing smaller states to exercise collective agency in their interactions with powerful external actors.³¹ By pooling resources, harmonizing policies, and mediating conflicts, the SADC enhances the region's bargaining power and ability to manage the complexities of a multipolar world.

New Regionalism Theory is particularly relevant when analyzing how Southern African states manage external pressures while pursuing regional cohesion. Unlike traditional regionalism, which often assumed top-down institutional compliance, NRT recognizes that member states retain significant national autonomy, and regional cooperation is shaped by both domestic political considerations and global structural pressures.³² This theoretical lens explains why disparities in political commitment, economic capacity, and strategic priorities limit the SADC's regional effectiveness, especially under external power competition.

When combined with Multipolarity Theory and African Agency Theory, New Regionalism Theory provides a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding Southern Africa's international position. Multipolarity explains the structure of global power and the competitive environment; African Agency Theory highlights the capacity of individual states to act strategically; and New Regionalism Theory situates these actions within a regional institutional context, demonstrating how collective frameworks can enhance or constrain national agency. Together, these theories provide a deeper understanding of how Southern African states leverage regional cooperation to maximize strategic options while navigating the opportunities and risks created by multiple external powers.

External Power Engagement: China, the US, the EU, Russia, and BRICS

Southern Africa occupies a strategically significant position in the global system, attracting sustained interest from multiple external powers. This engagement is driven by a combination of economic, political, and security interests, reflecting the

³⁰ Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell, *Regionalism in World Politics: Regional Organization and International Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³¹ Khadiagala, "Regional Organizations and Peacebuilding in Africa," 87–106.

³² Fawcett and Hurrell, *Regionalism in World Politics*.

dynamics of a multipolar international order. Understanding how these actors operate in the region is essential to analyzing the opportunities and constraints faced by Southern African states in exercising agency and shaping their development trajectories.

China has emerged as a major actor in Southern Africa through trade, investment, and infrastructure development, often within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative and bilateral resource-for-infrastructure agreements.³³ Chinese investment in transport networks, mining, and energy sectors provides Southern African states with critical development resources. However, scholars have highlighted the risks of debt dependence, limited technology transfer, and asymmetric bargaining power in these arrangements.³⁴ Despite these challenges, Southern African states often leverage China's engagement to diversify economic partnerships and negotiate favorable terms from other external actors.

The US and the EU have long influenced Southern Africa through aid, trade, and governance programs. Their engagement typically emphasizes democratic governance, human rights, and institutional development, often tying aid and investment to political and economic conditionalities.³⁵ While these mechanisms can promote policy reforms, they can also constrain national autonomy and create tension between domestic priorities and external expectations. Southern African states address these constraints by balancing commitments to Western partners with alternative opportunities offered by emerging powers, particularly China and Russia.

Russia's engagement in Southern Africa, although more limited than China or the West, focuses primarily on security cooperation, arms sales, and resource exploration. In countries such as Zimbabwe and Angola, Russia has leveraged historical Cold War-era ties to establish influence, often positioning itself as an alternative partner that respects state sovereignty and avoids open conditionalities.³⁶ While Russia's footprint is comparatively smaller, it provides Southern African states with additional leverage in negotiating aid, investment, and security arrangements with other global actors.

BRICS provides a platform for South–South cooperation that challenges traditional North–South dynamics. For Southern African states, BRICS represents opportunities for regional integration, development financing, and diversified partnerships.³⁷ South Africa, as both a BRICS member and a regional leader, plays a cen-

³³ Bräutigam, *The Dragon's Gift*.

³⁴ Corkin, "Uncovering African Agency," 191–210.

³⁵ Taylor, *Africa in International Politics*.

³⁶ Mlambo, "BRICS and Africa," 1–23.

³⁷ Leslie E. Armijo, "The BRICS Countries and the Future of Global Governance," *Global Governance* 13, no. 4 (2007): 456–76.

tral role in facilitating cooperation between Southern Africa and emerging powers, enabling member states to exercise collective agency while engaging in global multipolar competition.

Therefore, the presence of multiple external powers creates both opportunities and challenges for Southern African states. On the one hand, competing interests among China, the US, the EU, Russia, and BRICS allow states to diversify partnerships, negotiate better terms, and exercise greater agency. On the other hand, these engagements can reinforce dependence, exacerbate regional inequalities, and strain the SADC's ability to coordinate collective responses. Understanding the strategies employed by Southern African states to respond to these pressures is essential for assessing the region's capacity to act autonomously in a multipolar world.³⁸

The Role of the African Union

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, widely regarded as a turning point in the redistribution of economic influence toward emerging powers, Southern Africa has operated within an increasingly consolidated multipolar international order. The crisis weakened Western financial dominance and accelerated the global expansion of actors such as China, India, Brazil, and a resurgent Russia, each deepening diplomatic and economic engagement across Africa. In this shifting systemic context (2008–2024), Southern African states have not remained passive arenas of rivalry but have actively navigated great-power competition through layered institutional strategies. While much of the literature emphasizes the role of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), greater analytical attention must be paid to the continental dimension provided by the African Union (AU) as an additional platform of collective leverage.

The AU acts as a continental amplifier of regional agency by pooling the diplomatic leverage of its fifty-five member states. Structured summit diplomacy, including the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, EU–AU summits, and Russia–Africa forums, provides African governments with a coordinated platform for negotiating trade, infrastructure finance, security cooperation, and development assistance.³⁹ Agenda 2063, adopted in 2015, further institutionalizes a long-term continental development blueprint that shapes African engagement with external actors by articulating priorities such as industrialization, infrastructure connectivity, and economic diversification.⁴⁰ In this respect, the AU does not merely serve as a sym-

³⁸ Williams, "African Agency in Peace Operations," 163–87.

³⁹ Alden and Large, "China's Exceptionalism," 317–35; Adekeye Adebajo, *The Curse of Berlin: Africa after the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴⁰ African Union Commission, *Agenda 2063*.

bolic body; it provides normative coherence and strategic direction that Southern African states can invoke in negotiations with global powers. By embedding national interests within continental frameworks, states enhance their bargaining position and reduce the fragmentation that external actors have historically exploited.

However, while the AU strengthens collective agency, its capacity remains structurally constrained. Financial dependence on external donors, particularly the EU and other Western partners, continues to affect budgetary autonomy in peace and security operations.⁴¹ Internal political divergences among member states also limit cohesive continental positioning, particularly when external powers cultivate bilateral relationships that bypass multilateral structures. Accordingly, the AU serves both as a source of strategic leverage and as a contested institutional space. Its ability to operate effectively depends on internal unity and on the political commitment of member states, including those in Southern Africa, to favor collective bargaining over unilateral engagement.

Parallel to continental institutional leverage, Southern Africa's engagement with the Global South has expanded significantly since 2008 through mechanisms of South–South Cooperation (SSC). Unlike traditional North–South aid relationships grounded in conditionality and hierarchical donor–recipient dynamics, SSC is often framed rhetorically as a horizontal partnership premised on mutual benefit and shared development experience. China's infrastructure financing and industrial investment across Southern Africa, India's technical training and pharmaceutical partnerships, and Brazil's agricultural technology transfers, particularly in tropical agriculture, illustrate this diversification of development partnerships.⁴² Such cooperation has contributed to capacity building, technology transfer, and skills development in sectors critical to regional transformation.

Nonetheless, the idea of horizontality in SSC warrants critical examination. Although emerging powers present themselves as development partners rather than traditional donors, significant asymmetries in capital, technology, and market access remain. Chinese lending practices, for example, have generated debate over debt sustainability and long-term dependence risks, even as they provide much-needed infrastructure financing.⁴³ Similarly, capacity-building initiatives may foster knowledge exchange but often remain embedded within broader strategic economic interests of partner states. Thus, SSC does not eliminate structural inequali-

⁴¹ Garth le Pere and Nhamo Samasuwo, "The African Union and the Politics of Continental Integration," *African Security Review* 21, no. 2 (2012): 3–15.

⁴² Mawdsley, *From Recipients to Donors*; Paulo Esteves and Manáira Assunção, "South–South Cooperation and the Global Development Architecture," *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 10 (2014): 1775–90.

⁴³ Bräutigam, *The Dragon's Gift*.

ty; rather, it reconfigures it within a multipolar framework where multiple centers of influence coexist.

Triangular cooperation further complicates this landscape. In triangular arrangements, traditional donors collaborate with emerging powers and African states in joint development initiatives, combining financial resources, technical expertise, and local implementation capacity.⁴⁴ Triangular initiatives have been particularly visible in agricultural modernization, public administration reform, and vocational training. By enabling policy transfer and shared learning across Southern African, Latin American, and Asian partners, they strengthen institutional capacity and reduce dependence on any single external actor while reflecting the adaptation of global development frameworks to multipolar conditions.

From an International Political Economy perspective, these layered forms of engagement, including continental multilateralism, South–South partnerships, and triangular cooperation, represent strategies of diversification. Southern African states expand their diplomatic and economic options, thereby increasing room for maneuver within a competitive global environment. Diversification mitigates vulnerability to coercive dependence and enables selective alignment based on sectoral priorities. However, diversification does not equate to full autonomy. Structural constraints rooted in global capital flows, commodity dependence, and asymmetric trade relations continue to shape outcomes. Agency, therefore, must be understood as relational and constrained rather than absolute.

Since 2008, Southern Africa has incrementally adjusted its position within a multipolar order by pursuing pragmatic balancing rather than exclusive alignment. Engagement through AU diplomacy, South–South partnerships, and triangular cooperation has expanded strategic options while reinforcing a form of agency exercised within enduring structural limits. Multipolarity has therefore widened diplomatic space without fundamentally removing external constraints.

Regional and National Responses to Multipolarity in Southern Africa

Southern African states confront external pressures from competing global powers while pursuing national development and regional integration. To address this challenge, they employ regional coordination, national diplomacy, and balancing strategies to safeguard autonomy, maximize opportunities, and minimize dependence. These strategies are shaped by the dynamics of multipolarity, the principles of African agency, and the structures provided by regional institutions such as the SADC.

⁴⁴ United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC), *South-South and Triangular Cooperation in Action*.

The SADC serves as the primary institutional framework through which Southern African states coordinate political, economic, and security policies. Established in 1992, the SADC aims to promote regional stability, economic integration, and collective bargaining with external powers.⁴⁵ Through mechanisms such as the SADC Secretariat, regional protocols, and peer review processes, member states attempt to harmonize positions on trade agreements, infrastructure development, and foreign investment. The SADC also plays a critical role in mediating disputes and promoting peace and security in the region, thereby strengthening collective agency and reducing regional vulnerability to external influence.

However, the SADC's effectiveness is affected by institutional weaknesses, differing national priorities, and resource disparities among member states. Murithi argues that, while South Africa often takes a leadership role in regional diplomacy, smaller states such as Lesotho, Eswatini, and Malawi may struggle to align with broader regional positions, limiting the SADC's ability to present a unified front in negotiations with external powers.⁴⁶

At the national level, Southern African states employ a variety of diplomatic strategies to maximize benefits from external engagement. These strategies include diversification of partnerships, selective alignment, and strategic negotiation. For example, Zimbabwe has historically balanced relations between external powers, leveraging competition among multiple actors to secure development aid, trade agreements, and diplomatic support.⁴⁷ Likewise, Mozambique has cultivated partnerships with both Western and emerging powers to finance infrastructure projects while maintaining sovereignty over national decision-making.

National diplomacy is closely tied to domestic political priorities, including economic development, security, and social stability. Southern African leaders must balance the strategic benefits of engaging multiple external powers against the risks of dependence, domestic political backlash, and reputational costs.⁴⁸ This requires careful calibration of foreign policy and often demands a flexible approach that can adapt to shifting global dynamics.

Balancing Strategies in a Multipolar Context

In an increasingly multipolar international system, Southern African states have adopted a range of balancing strategies to manage competition among external powers while safeguarding national and regional interests. Rather than aligning

⁴⁵ Khadiagala, "Regional Organizations and Peacebuilding in Africa," 87–106.

⁴⁶ Murithi, "The African Union's Evolving Role in Peace Operations," 1–15.

⁴⁷ Corkin, "Uncovering African Agency," 191–210.

⁴⁸ Taylor, *Africa in International Politics*.

exclusively with a single hegemon, states in the region pursue multi-alignment and hedging strategies, engaging simultaneously with multiple geopolitical actors and emerging partners from the Global South. This approach enables Southern African states to maximize economic and diplomatic benefits while limiting overdependence on any one external partner.⁴⁹

A key balancing strategy involves the diversification of economic partnerships. Southern African governments actively seek investment, trade, and development finance from multiple sources, including China-led infrastructure financing, Western development assistance, and South–South cooperation frameworks such as BRICS. By diversifying external economic ties, states enhance their bargaining power and retain greater autonomy in development planning.⁵⁰

At the diplomatic level, Southern Africa employs institutional and regional balancing through multilateral engagement. Regional bodies such as the SADC, alongside continental and global platforms including the AU, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the United Nations, provide collective diplomatic leverage when dealing with major powers. Acting through multilateral forums allows states to reduce external pressure and articulate shared regional positions.⁵¹

Southern African states also engage in normative balancing, selectively endorsing global norms such as sovereignty, non-interference, and development-first approaches while resisting externally imposed governance or security agendas perceived as infringing on domestic autonomy. This strategy is particularly evident in relations with Western donors and international financial institutions, where states seek to reconcile aid acceptance with policy independence.⁵²

Balancing remains central to Southern African states' responses to multipolarity. By exploiting competition among external powers, states can enhance bargaining leverage and diversify sources of support. For example, South Africa's engagement with BRICS provides an avenue to strengthen economic partnerships while maintaining traditional relationships with the EU and the US.⁵³ Smaller states often adopt a form of soft balancing, engaging with multiple external actors with-

⁴⁹ Chris Alden and Maxi Schoeman, "South Africa in the Company of Giants: The Search for Leadership in a Transforming Global Order," *International Affairs* 89, no. 1 (2013): 111–29.

⁵⁰ Sören Scholvin and Peter Draper, "The Gateway to Africa? Geography, Strategy and South Africa's Regional Economic Relations," *South African Journal of International Affairs* 19, no. 3 (2012): 381–400.

⁵¹ Siphamandla Zondi, "Africa and the Changing Global Order," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 56, no. 2 (2021): 313–29.

⁵² Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁵³ Mlambo, "BRICS and Africa," 1–23.

out formally aligning with any single power, thereby maintaining flexibility and autonomy.⁵⁴

Balancing strategies are not limited to economic or diplomatic considerations; they also extend to security and governance. Southern African states increasingly participate in joint peacekeeping initiatives, regional conflict mediation, and multi-lateral policy forums to collectively navigate external pressures while promoting regional stability.⁵⁵ These strategies exemplify how national and regional forms of agency interact to create a more resilient and strategic Southern Africa in a multi-polar world.

However, the effectiveness of these balancing strategies remains constrained by structural inequalities, limited state capacity, and regional fragmentation. While multipolarity expands strategic choice, the ability of Southern African states to balance external powers successfully depends on stronger domestic governance, economic transformation, and deeper regional coordination.

Structural Constraints on Southern African Regional Agency

Despite the emergence of a multipolar international order, the agency of Southern African states remains constrained by enduring structural, economic, and political limitations. One major constraint is economic dependence, rooted in colonial legacies and reinforced by continued reliance on external finance, foreign direct investment, and development assistance. Many Southern African economies remain heavily dependent on primary commodity exports, limiting their bargaining power in global markets and exposing them to external price shocks.⁵⁶

A second limitation arises from asymmetric power relations between Southern Africa and external actors. Although multipolarity offers greater choice among partners, relations with major powers such as China, the EU, and the US often remain unequal. External actors continue to shape development priorities through conditional financing, trade regimes, and strategic investments, constraining domestic policy autonomy.⁵⁷

In addition, institutional weakness and governance challenges further restrict African agency. Limited state capacity, corruption, and fragmented policy coordination undermine the ability of governments to negotiate, implement, and monitor

⁵⁴ Williams, "African Agency in Peace Operations," 163–87.

⁵⁵ Murithi, "The African Union's Evolving Role in Peace Operations," 1–15.

⁵⁶ Patrick Bond, *Looting Africa: The Economics of Exploitation* (London: Zed Books, 2006).

⁵⁷ Ian Taylor, *Africa Rising? BRICS–Africa Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2016).

external engagements effectively. In some cases, elite capture of external resources distorts development outcomes and weakens accountability to local populations.⁵⁸

Regional fragmentation also limits agency. While the Southern African Development Community is intended to enhance collective bargaining and regional coherence, overlapping memberships, divergent national interests, and uneven implementation of regional commitments reduce its effectiveness as a unified actor in global affairs.⁵⁹

Furthermore, external political and security pressures constrain Southern African autonomy. Sanctions regimes, geopolitical rivalries, and donor-driven governance norms can restrict diplomatic flexibility and narrow policy choices, particularly for states facing economic or political isolation.⁶⁰

Although Southern Africa exercises limited agency through diversification of partnerships and regional diplomacy, this agency remains structurally bounded. Without significant improvements in economic transformation, institutional capacity, and regional coordination, the ability of Southern African states to shape external engagements on their own terms will continue to be constrained.

The SADC has repeatedly demonstrated institutional limitations that constrain its capacity to act decisively in regional crises. The SADC's structural weaknesses stem not only from a modest secretariat with limited autonomous authority, but also from a decision-making architecture that relies heavily on consensus rather than empowered institutional leadership. Scholars have noted that the SADC Secretariat lacks the robust mandate enjoyed by comparable bodies such as the Economic Community of West African States Commission, rendering it dependent on the political will and resource commitments of individual member governments for both operational direction and financial sustenance.⁶¹ Without a permanent mediation unit, the Secretariat remains incapable of initiating preventive diplomacy or enforcing decisions, undermining the organization's ability to respond swiftly to emerging crises.⁶²

These structural limitations have had tangible impacts on the SADC's peace operations. The SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM), authorized in July 2021

⁵⁸ David Booth et al., *Developmental Regimes in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁵⁹ Southern African Development Community (SADC), *SADC Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) 2020–2030* (Gaborone: SADC, 2020).

⁶⁰ Zondi, "Africa and the Changing Global Order," 313–29.

⁶¹ "Why Is SADC Slow to Intervene in Political Crises?" *PSC Report* (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2018), <https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/why-is-sadc-slow-to-intervene-in-political-crises>.

⁶² Thomas Mandrup, *The Effectiveness of the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM)* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2025).

in response to the violent insurgency in Cabo Delgado, suffered from chronic resource constraints and operational gaps that impeded effective action. Although SAMIM helped reduce insurgent capacity and restore some state presence, it “never achieved key tasks such as sustained territorial stabilization, air and maritime support, or long-term capacity building of Mozambican forces,” owing in part to mismatched resources and limited host-nation cooperation.⁶³ Severe logistical constraints limited the mission’s effectiveness, including inadequate troop levels, weak intelligence capacity, and the absence of integrated command-and-control structures.⁶⁴ Parallel bilateral deployments further complicated regional coordination. Rwanda’s deployment of troops in 2021 preceded the full operational deployment of SAMIM, indicating that bilateral security arrangements were often more agile and responsive than the regional mission itself.⁶⁵

Moreover, the SADC’s role in mediating economic crises among member states has been largely rhetorical rather than operational. In debt negotiations involving countries such as Zambia and Zimbabwe, the SADC has supported restructuring through political communiqués but lacks binding mechanisms to coordinate creditor negotiations or enforce fiscal frameworks. Member states, therefore, remain reliant on institutions such as the IMF or bilateral creditor arrangements to resolve sovereign debt distress. As a result, the SADC functions more as a diplomatic forum than as a driver of collective agency, with structural and resource constraints limiting its ability to translate regional consensus into action.

Opportunities in a Multipolar Order

The emergence of a multipolar international order presents significant strategic opportunities for Southern Africa. As global power becomes more diffused among geopolitical actors, Southern African states gain greater room for diplomatic maneuvering, economic diversification, and policy autonomy.⁶⁶

One major opportunity lies in the strategic diversification of partnerships. Multipolarity enables Southern African states to reduce overdependence on traditional Western donors by engaging a wider range of external partners simultaneously. China’s infrastructure financing, India’s development cooperation, and South–South frameworks such as BRICS provide alternative sources of investment,

⁶³ Mandrup, *The Effectiveness of the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM)*.

⁶⁴ “Why Is SADC Slow to Intervene in Political Crises?”

⁶⁵ Mandrup, *The Effectiveness of the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM)*.

⁶⁶ Scholvin and Draper, “The Gateway to Africa?” 381–400.

trade, and development finance.⁶⁷ This diversification strengthens bargaining power and enhances state agency in negotiating development outcomes.

A second opportunity relates to regional integration and collective bargaining. Institutions such as the SADC can leverage multipolar competition to secure more favorable trade terms, infrastructure support, and development assistance. Acting collectively enables Southern Africa to negotiate more effectively with external powers and reduces asymmetric dependencies at the national level.⁶⁸

Multipolarity also creates space for normative and diplomatic agency. Southern African states increasingly engage in multilateral forums to advance shared positions on development, sovereignty, and global governance reform. This engagement allows the region to shape global norms rather than merely adapt to them.⁶⁹

Finally, the multipolar order creates opportunities for economic transformation and industrial development. Competing external actors seek access to Southern Africa's natural resources, markets, and strategic corridors, which, if managed effectively, can support industrial policy, infrastructure development, and technology transfer.⁷⁰ When aligned with coherent domestic strategies, external engagement can contribute to long-term development rather than extractive dependence.

While multipolarity does not eliminate structural inequalities, it expands the range of strategic choices available to Southern African states. The extent to which these opportunities translate into meaningful development outcomes depends on regional coordination, domestic governance capacity, and the ability to negotiate external engagements on mutually beneficial terms.

Zimbabwe: Sanctions, China, and Strategic Balancing

Zimbabwe represents one of the most illustrative cases of how African agency is both enabled and constrained within a multipolar international system. Since the early 2000s, Zimbabwe's relations with Western powers, particularly the US and the EU, have been severely strained by land reform policies, governance disputes, and human rights concerns. The imposition of targeted sanctions and the withdrawal of Western development assistance significantly narrowed Zimbabwe's external

⁶⁷ Alden and Schoeman, "South Africa in the Company of Giants," 111–29.

⁶⁸ Margaret C. Lee, "The Political Economy of Regional Integration in Southern Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35, no. 1 (2009): 1–18.

⁶⁹ Zondi, "Africa and the Changing Global Order," 313–29.

⁷⁰ United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), *Transformative Industrial Policy for Africa* (Addis Ababa: UNECA, 2016).

engagement options, compelling the state to pursue alternative partnerships beyond the West.⁷¹

In response, Zimbabwe adopted the “Look East Policy,” marking a strategic pivot toward China, Russia, and other non-Western actors. China has since become Zimbabwe’s most significant external partner, investing heavily in mining, energy, telecommunications, agriculture, and infrastructure. Key projects include investments in platinum and lithium extraction, power generation facilities, and transport infrastructure, positioning China as a central actor in Zimbabwe’s economic recovery strategy.⁷² This realignment illustrates how multipolarity can expand diplomatic and economic alternatives for states facing Western exclusion.

However, Zimbabwe’s engagement with China and other emerging powers has not translated into full policy autonomy. Chinese financing has often been structured around loan-backed infrastructure projects and resource-for-infrastructure arrangements, reinforcing asymmetric power relations. Limited transparency in loan agreements and weak domestic institutional oversight have raised concerns about debt sustainability and long-term economic sovereignty.⁷³ As such, Zimbabwe’s agency remains restricted by its dependence on external capital and commodity exports.

Beyond China, Zimbabwe has sought to diversify its partnerships by engaging with Russia, particularly in the mining and energy sectors, and through renewed diplomatic outreach to BRICS members and regional allies. Nevertheless, these relationships remain largely transactional and have not significantly altered Zimbabwe’s structural economic vulnerabilities. Multipolar engagement has thus provided strategic flexibility, but not structural transformation.⁷⁴

At the regional level, Zimbabwe’s agency is further constrained by the limited effectiveness of collective bargaining mechanisms. While the SADC has offered diplomatic support, particularly in resisting regime-change narratives and sanctions, the organization has struggled to translate political solidarity into meaningful economic leverage or coordinated development strategies.⁷⁵ Regional fragmentation and divergent national interests limit the SADC’s ability to function as a unified actor capable of enhancing Zimbabwe’s negotiating power.

Domestic political dynamics also significantly shape Zimbabwe’s agency. The politicization of external engagement, elite capture of foreign investment, and governance challenges have undermined the developmental impact of international

⁷¹ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa*.

⁷² Taylor, *Africa Rising?*

⁷³ Pádraig Carmody, *The New Scramble for Africa* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

⁷⁴ Taylor, *Africa Rising?*

⁷⁵ Lee, “The Political Economy of Regional Integration in Southern Africa,” 1–18.

partnerships. External actors often engage with state elites rather than broader societal institutions, reinforcing patterns of exclusion and limiting accountability.⁷⁶ Domestic institutional constraints limit Zimbabwe's ability to benefit from multipolar competition. Sanctions continue to shape investor perceptions, restrict access to international finance, and reinforce reliance on non-Western partners. Consequently, Zimbabwe's bargaining power remains limited, challenging the assumption that multipolarity inherently strengthens Global South agency.

Zimbabwe's experience reflects a paradox of agency in a multipolar system. While the diffusion of global power has allowed Zimbabwe to avoid complete isolation and maintain economic and diplomatic links, its ability to shape these engagements on its own terms remains limited. Structural economic weakness, governance constraints, regional fragmentation, and asymmetric external partnerships continue to bind Zimbabwe's agency.

Zimbabwe's case underscores the gap between diplomatic flexibility under multipolarity and limited structural economic agency. By the end of 2024, public and publicly guaranteed debt stood at approximately US\$23.3 billion (72.9 percent of GDP), including US\$16.7 billion in external debt (52.5 percent of GDP).⁷⁷ Arrears to external creditors, estimated at US\$7.4 billion or about 23.2 percent of GDP, have blocked access to concessional financing from institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, underscoring constraints on access to global capital markets.⁷⁸

Zimbabwe's creditor composition reveals distinct multipolar dynamics. China is the largest non-Paris Club creditor, holding roughly US\$2.0 billion (95 percent of non-Paris Club debt), primarily linked to infrastructure projects such as power station expansions.⁷⁹ Paris Club creditors, including Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the US, account for substantial bilateral external obligations (approximately US\$3.9 billion), while multilateral lenders such as the World Bank and AfDB account for smaller tranches but significant arrears.⁸⁰ This complex

⁷⁶ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa*.

⁷⁷ International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Zimbabwe: 2024 Article IV Consultation—Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Zimbabwe* (Washington, DC: IMF, 2024), <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/ZWE>.

⁷⁸ IMF, *Zimbabwe: 2024 Article IV Consultation*.

⁷⁹ Government of Zimbabwe, Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, *Annual Public Debt Report to Parliament* (Harare: Government of Zimbabwe, 2023), <https://zimtreaury.co.zw/public-debt-management/>.

⁸⁰ Government of Zimbabwe, Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, *Annual Public Debt Report to Parliament* (Harare: Government of Zimbabwe, 2025), <https://zimtreaury.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Public-Debt-Report-to-Parliament-ZWE.pdf>.

creditor mix illustrates a multipolar landscape where African states are engaged simultaneously with Western, Chinese, and multilateral lenders, yet remain constrained by arrears, limited access to new financing, and weak creditworthiness.

Zimbabwe's export structure further highlights structural limitations. Zimbabwe's trade engagement with China remains limited relative to other Southern African economies. Zimbabwe's exports to China, largely composed of commodities such as tobacco and minerals, have recently totaled about US\$1.71 billion, compared with roughly US\$1.41 billion in imports from China.⁸¹ The predominance of commodity exports limits opportunities for structural transformation or movement up global value chains. Despite recent macroeconomic stabilization efforts and the launch of an IMF staff-monitored program focused on fiscal and monetary reforms, Zimbabwe's capacity to convert diplomatic engagement into deeper economic agency remains limited. A heavy debt burden and unresolved arrears to Western financial institutions continue to prevent full re-engagement with global financial markets until these obligations are cleared.⁸²

South Africa: Regional Leadership and Middle-Power Diplomacy

South Africa occupies a distinctive position in Southern Africa and the broader Global South as a regional power and an emerging middle power in an increasingly multipolar international system. Post-apartheid South African foreign policy has consistently emphasized multilateralism, African solidarity, South–South cooperation, and reform of global governance structures. Guided by these principles, Pretoria has engaged competing external powers through a strategy of multi-alignment rather than exclusive partnership with any single major power.⁸³

A fundamental pillar of South Africa's multipolar engagement is its membership in BRICS, which has elevated its global diplomatic profile and expanded its strategic options beyond traditional Western partners. Through BRICS, South Africa has sought to advance development financing alternatives, most notably through the New Development Bank (NDB), while also promoting Global South perspectives on international political and economic reform.⁸⁴ This engagement illustrates

⁸¹ Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT), *External Trade Statistics* (Harare: ZIMSTAT, 2025), https://www.zimstat.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/Macro/Trade/2025/-EXTERNAL_TRADE_04_2025.pdf.

⁸² International Monetary Fund (IMF), "IMF Staff Completes 2024 Article IV Mission to Zimbabwe," Press Release No. 24/47, February 14, 2024, <https://www.imf.org/en/-News/Articles/2024/02/13/pr2447-zimbabwe-imf-staff-completes-2024-article-iv-mission>.

⁸³ Adam Habib, *South Africa's Suspended Revolution: Hopes and Prospects* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2013).

⁸⁴ Taylor, *Africa Rising?*

South Africa's capacity to exercise agency by selectively leveraging emerging power coalitions to complement existing ties with the EU and the US.

Economically, South Africa maintains diversified external relations. The EU remains South Africa's largest trading bloc, while China has become its largest individual trading partner and an important investor in infrastructure, manufacturing, and energy. This diversification strengthens South Africa's bargaining position and reduces its vulnerability to unilateral external pressure.⁸⁵ However, economic relations are marked by persistent asymmetries, particularly in trade structures that continue to favor exports of primary and semi-processed goods, limiting industrial upgrading and long-term autonomy.

At the regional level, South Africa has sought to exercise leadership through the SADC and the African Union (AU). It has played a prominent role in conflict mediation, peacekeeping, and regional diplomacy, including engagements in Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These initiatives reflect South Africa's ambition to act as a stabilizing force and norm entrepreneur within Southern Africa.⁸⁶ Yet regional leadership remains contested, as neighboring states often perceive South Africa's dominance as self-interested or hegemonic, constraining its ability to act as the unified regional representative.⁸⁷

Domestic political and economic constraints further complicate South Africa's agency in a multipolar context. Chronic economic stagnation, high unemployment, energy insecurity, and governance challenges have weakened state capacity and reduced foreign policy coherence. Domestic pressures increasingly divert attention inward, limiting resources and political capital available for regional leadership and global diplomacy.⁸⁸ These internal dynamics underscore the extent to which external agency is contingent upon domestic stability and economic performance.

Normatively, South Africa has adopted a cautious diplomatic posture that emphasizes sovereignty, non-interference, and dialogue, particularly in relation to global crises involving Russia, China, and Western powers. This stance reflects an effort to balance principled commitments to human rights with pragmatic considerations of national interest and strategic autonomy. While this approach enhances diplomatic flexibility, it has also attracted criticism from Western partners and civil society actors who view it as morally ambiguous.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Scholvin and Draper, "The Gateway to Africa?" 381–400.

⁸⁶ Alden and Schoeman, "South Africa in the Company of Giants," 111–29.

⁸⁷ Lee, "The Political Economy of Regional Integration in Southern Africa," 1–18.

⁸⁸ Zondi, "Africa and the Changing Global Order," 313–29.

⁸⁹ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa*.

Therefore, South Africa's experience highlights both the possibilities and limits of regional agency in a multipolar world. The country has successfully leveraged diversified partnerships, multilateral platforms, and middle-power diplomacy to expand its strategic options. However, domestic economic challenges, contested regional leadership, and enduring global power asymmetries constrain its ability to shape regional and global outcomes. South Africa's case demonstrates that while multipolarity offers expanded space for agency, effective leadership ultimately depends on internal capacity, regional legitimacy, and a coherent long-term strategy.

South Africa's economy illustrates that diplomatic latitude within a multipolar order does not equate to structural economic agency. By 2025, South Africa's gross government debt had reached approximately 77.4 percent of GDP, prompting the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to recommend clearer fiscal rules designed to reduce the ratio to around 70 percent over the medium term.⁹⁰ External debt, including obligations to foreign creditors and bondholders, reached an all-time high of about US\$193 billion by late 2025, reflecting South Africa's deep integration into global financial markets.⁹¹ Although much of South Africa's debt is domestic (reducing foreign exchange risk), a substantial portion of government bonds and external liabilities are held by foreign investors, reflecting deep exposure to global capital flows.⁹²

Credit exposures to China remain relatively modest in aggregate terms but are politically significant. By 2020, South Africa's obligations to Chinese lenders amounted to roughly 4 percent of GDP, including high-profile loans to state-owned utilities such as Eskom, where Chinese financing of about R370 billion (approximately US\$25 billion) supported government stimulus initiatives.⁹³ These loans have drawn criticism and allegations of governance issues, illustrating how Chinese financial engagement can be politically potent without dominating the overall

⁹⁰ National Treasury, *Budget Review 2026* (Pretoria: National Treasury, 2026), <https://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/National%20Budget/2026/review/FullBR.pdf>; International Monetary Fund (IMF), *South Africa: 2025 Article IV Consultation—Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for South Africa* (Washington, DC: IMF, 2026), <https://www.imf.org/en/news/articles/2026/02/10/pr-26039-south-africa-imf-executive-board-concludes-2025-article-iv-consultation>.

⁹¹ South African Reserve Bank (SARB), *Quarterly Bulletin – December 2025* (Pretoria: SARB, 2025), <https://www.resbank.co.za/en/home/publications/publication-detail-pages/quarterly-bulletins/quarterly-bulletin-publications/2025/december>.

⁹² National Treasury, *Budget Review 2026*; IMF, *South Africa: 2025 Article IV Consultation*.

⁹³ Boston University Global Development Policy Center, *Chinese Loans to Africa Database* (Boston: Boston University, 2026), <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/chinese-loans-to-africa-database/>.

debt portfolio. On the other hand, South Africa's linkages with Western creditors are more substantial overall: Western institutional investors, commercial bondholders, and private banks hold a large share of the sovereign bond market and external liabilities.⁹⁴

Trade patterns similarly reflect structural constraints. China is South Africa's largest trading partner for both exports and imports, with exports dominated by commodities such as ores and precious metals and imports concentrated in manufactured goods, reinforcing structural constraints on higher value-added industrial development.⁹⁵ At the same time, Western markets (the EU and the US) remain major destinations for South African manufactured exports such as motor vehicles and machinery, reflecting entrenched trade patterns shaped more by global value chains than by the diplomatic options available to Pretoria. Thus, while multipolarity expands South Africa's external partnerships, it does not fundamentally alter the structural foundations of the economy. Debt and trade relations remain embedded in global financial and production networks that privilege established economic hierarchies.

Mozambique: Energy Resources and External Power Rivalry

Mozambique has emerged as one of the most strategically significant states in Southern Africa in a multipolar international system, largely due to the discovery of vast offshore natural gas reserves in the Rovuma Basin. These discoveries have positioned Mozambique at the center of global energy geopolitics, attracting intense interest from a diverse range of external actors, including Western multinational corporations, China, Russia, and emerging powers seeking to secure long-term energy supplies. As a result, Mozambique offers a critical case for examining how external power competition interacts with domestic capacity and regional security dynamics to shape African agency.⁹⁶

The influx of foreign direct investment (FDI) into Mozambique's extractive sector initially raised expectations of rapid economic transformation, industrial development, and fiscal sustainability. Major liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects led by multinational corporations were widely expected to deliver substantial fiscal revenues and stimulate infrastructure development. However, Mozambique's capacity to leverage these investments for inclusive development has been con-

⁹⁴ SARB, *Quarterly Bulletin – December 2025*.

⁹⁵ National Treasury, *Budget Review 2026*; IMF, *South Africa: 2025 Article IV Consultation*.

⁹⁶ Marcus Power, "Gas, Geopolitics and Mozambique," *Review of African Political Economy* 45, no. 156 (2018): 1–18.

strained by weak institutional frameworks, limited local content integration, and heavy reliance on foreign capital and expertise. This has reinforced structural dependence rather than fostering autonomous development.⁹⁷

Multipolar competition in Mozambique extends beyond economic engagement to encompass security dynamics, particularly following the outbreak of a violent insurgency in Cabo Delgado province. The escalation of conflict in this gas-rich region exposed the Mozambican state's limited capacity to provide security, prompting the involvement of external actors. Regional interventions by the SADC and bilateral military assistance from Rwanda underscore the extent to which Mozambique's sovereignty and agency have become intertwined with external security provision.⁹⁸

External military assistance has stabilized key areas but has also revealed the paradox of agency under multipolarity: Mozambique retains formal sovereignty while relying on external security actors that constrain autonomous decision-making. In addition, prioritization of the protection of extractive investments over broader human security has fueled local grievances and undermined state legitimacy.⁹⁹

Regionally, Mozambique's experience reflects the limits of collective African agency. Although the SADC's intervention demonstrates regional solidarity, the slow and fragmented response revealed weaknesses in regional coordination and capacity. External actors continue to play decisive roles in shaping security and economic outcomes, reinforcing asymmetric power relations even within ostensibly African-led frameworks.¹⁰⁰

Mozambique's engagement with China and other emerging powers has focused primarily on infrastructure development and resource extraction. While these partnerships offer alternatives to Western-dominated financial institutions, they often reproduce extractive economic patterns and lack transparency, limiting opportunities for sustainable industrialization and domestic value addition.¹⁰¹ As such, Mozambique's participation in multipolar competition has expanded its external partnerships without significantly enhancing its structural agency.

Mozambique illustrates how multipolarity can intensify external competition around strategic resources while simultaneously constraining local agency through

⁹⁷ Joseph Hanlon, "Following the Donor-Designed Path: Mozambique and the Pitfalls of Foreign Aid," *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2018): 1–20.

⁹⁸ Cedric de Coning, "Adaptive Peacebuilding," *International Affairs* 96, no. 2 (2020): 301–17, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix251>.

⁹⁹ Hanlon, "Following the Donor-Designed Path," 1–20.

¹⁰⁰ de Coning, "Adaptive Peacebuilding," 301–17.

¹⁰¹ Carmody, *The New Scramble for Africa*.

economic dependence and security reliance. This case also underscores that the presence of multiple external actors does not automatically translate into increased bargaining power or development gains. Instead, effective agency in a multipolar world requires strong institutions, inclusive governance, and regional coordination, conditions that remain fragile in Mozambique's current political economy.

Mozambique's Cabo Delgado crisis provides a second illustration of conditional agency within a multipolar international order. Following the discovery of vast offshore natural gas reserves in the Rovuma Basin in the early 2010s, Mozambique became the site of some of Africa's largest LNG investments. In 2019, a US\$20 billion LNG project led by TotalEnergies (now TotalEnergies SE) reached final investment decision, making it one of the largest foreign direct investments in African history.¹⁰² Additional LNG projects included ExxonMobil's planned Rovuma LNG development and Eni's Coral South FLNG project, which began production in 2022.¹⁰³

However, the insurgency in Cabo Delgado, which escalated after 2017, directly threatened these investments. By 2021, TotalEnergies declared force majeure following attacks near Palma.¹⁰⁴ The security vacuum prompted both regional and bilateral responses. In July 2021, the SADC deployed the SAMIM.¹⁰⁵ That same month, Rwanda independently deployed approximately 1,000 troops to Cabo Delgado under a bilateral agreement with Maputo, preceding the full operationalization of SAMIM forces.¹⁰⁶

The sequencing is analytically significant. Rwanda's rapid bilateral intervention secured key urban centers and LNG project zones, while the SADC's regional deployment faced logistical and coordination challenges. This episode underscores two dynamics: first, the multiplicity of security actors in a multipolar environment; and second, the limits of regional institutional capacity relative to agile bilateral arrangements. While Mozambique leveraged both regional and bilateral partner-

¹⁰² TotalEnergies, "Mozambique LNG Project Overview," corporate report, 2019.

¹⁰³ Eni, "Coral South Introduces Hydrocarbons to FLNG Offshore Mozambique," press release, June 18, 2022, <https://www.eni.com/en-IT/media/press-release/2022/06/coral-south-introduces-hydrocarbons-to-flng-offshore-mozambique.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Alex Vines, "The Evolving International Response to the Cabo Delgado Crisis" (London: Chatham House, 2021).

¹⁰⁵ Southern African Development Community (SADC), "Communiqué of the Extraordinary Summit of SADC Heads of State and Government," June 23, 2021, <https://www.sadc.int/latest-news/communique-extraordinary-summit-sadc-heads-state-and-government-23rd-june-2021>.

¹⁰⁶ Government of Rwanda, "Rwanda Deploys Joint Force to Mozambique," press release, July 9, 2021, <https://www.gov.rw/blog-detail/rwanda-deploys-joint-force-to-mozambique>.

ships, the security response also revealed fragmentation in African collective action.

Despite the transformative potential of LNG development, Mozambique's fiscal crisis—exacerbated by the 2016 “hidden debt” scandal involving more than US\$2 billion in undisclosed loans—significantly constrained the state's leverage over foreign investors.¹⁰⁷ As in Zambia, external capital inflows did not automatically translate into structural economic agency. LNG contracts remain dominated by multinational energy corporations, with Mozambique positioned primarily as a resource exporter rather than a value-chain integrator.

Zambia: Debt, Infrastructure, and Chinese Engagement

Zambia offers a revealing case of how Southern African states engage with a multipolar international system through infrastructure-led development while confronting severe constraints on economic and political agency. Since the early 2000s, this country has actively diversified its external partnerships beyond traditional Western donors, engaging China, multilateral financial institutions, and emerging economies to finance large-scale infrastructure projects. This strategy reflects an effort to leverage multipolar competition to accelerate development and reduce dependence on a single external patron.¹⁰⁸

China has emerged as Zambia's most significant bilateral financier, funding major projects in transport, energy, telecommunications, and urban infrastructure. Chinese loans and investments have supported road construction, hydroelectric power stations, airports, and public buildings, positioning infrastructure development as a central pillar of Zambia's growth strategy.¹⁰⁹ These engagements demonstrate Zambia's attempt to utilize alternative development financing models outside Western conditionality frameworks.

However, the rapid rise in external debt, much of it contracted from Chinese lenders, laid bare the limits of Zambia's agency in a multipolar international environment. Zambia's 2020 sovereign default, the first by an African country during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted the vulnerabilities inherent in infrastructure-centered borrowing that was not matched by sufficient economic diversification or

¹⁰⁷ International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Republic of Mozambique: 2025 Article IV Consultation—Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Mozambique*, IMF Country Report No. 2026/045 (Washington, DC: IMF, 2026), <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2026/02/19/republic-of-mozambique-2025-article-iv-consultation-press-release-staff-report-and-574050>.

¹⁰⁸ Carmody, *The New Scramble for Africa*.

¹⁰⁹ Deborah Bräutigam, “A Critical Look at Chinese ‘Debt-Trap Diplomacy,’” *Area Development and Policy* 5, no. 1 (2020): 1–14.

fiscal discipline.¹¹⁰ Debt distress significantly reduced Zambia's bargaining power, forcing renewed engagement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other Western-dominated financial institutions.

Zambia's experience highlights the complexity of balancing external partners. While engagement with China provided rapid financing and visible infrastructure gains, it also created opaque debt structures and limited transparency in loan agreements. Weak domestic oversight and governance challenges further constrained Zambia's ability to manage these partnerships strategically.¹¹¹ As a result, multipolar engagement expanded Zambia's options but ultimately narrowed policy autonomy when debt obligations became unsustainable.

Beyond China, Zambia has sought to rebalance its external relations by strengthening ties with the EU, the US, and international financial institutions. The post-2021 government prioritized debt restructuring, fiscal consolidation, and renewed cooperation with Western partners as part of economic recovery efforts. This development highlights the conditional character of agency under multipolarity, as states may realign their partnerships in response to economic necessity rather than strategic preference.¹¹²

At the regional level, Zambia plays an active role within the Southern African Development Community (SADC), benefiting from relative political stability and a history of regional cooperation. However, regional institutions have provided limited insulation against global financial pressures, highlighting the constraints of regional agency in addressing debt and development challenges.¹¹³

Zambia's case demonstrates that multipolarity does not inherently empower African states. While diversified external partnerships can enhance short-term development capacity, weak domestic institutions, debt dependence, and global financial hierarchies continue to restrict long-term autonomy. Zambia's experience underscores the importance of aligning external engagement with sustainable development strategies and robust governance frameworks to translate multipolar opportunities into genuine agency.

The Zambian case illustrates the limits of structural economic agency in a multipolar system. By 2020, Zambia's external public debt had reached approximately 120 percent of GDP, culminating in sovereign default in November 2020,

¹¹⁰ International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Zambia: Request for an Extended Credit Facility Arrangement—Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Zambia*, IMF Country Report No. 21/204 (Washington, DC: IMF, 2021).

¹¹¹ Carmody, *The New Scramble for Africa*.

¹¹² IMF, *Zambia: Request for an Extended Credit Facility Arrangement* (2021).

¹¹³ Lee, "The Political Economy of Regional Integration in Southern Africa," 1–18.

the first African state to default during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹⁴ Of Zambia's roughly US\$17 billion in external public debt at the time of default, approximately US\$6 billion was owed to Chinese creditors (primarily policy banks such as China Exim Bank), while around US\$3 billion was held by Eurobond holders from Western financial markets.¹¹⁵ This creditor composition complicated restructuring negotiations, as Chinese policy banks, private Western bondholders, and multilateral institutions operated under distinct frameworks.

The case demonstrates both expanded diplomatic options and structural constraints. On the one hand, Zambia diversified its financing sources during the 2010s, issuing three Eurobonds (2012, 2014, 2015) while simultaneously contracting significant Chinese infrastructure loans for roads, airports, and hydropower.¹¹⁶ On the other hand, this diversification did not translate into structural transformation: copper continued to account for over 70 percent of export earnings, reinforcing commodity dependence.¹¹⁷ Amid fluctuating copper prices and widening fiscal deficits, Zambia's exposure to external creditors, both Chinese and Western, became unsustainable.

The subsequent restructuring under the G20 Common Framework further illustrates conditional agency. As China co-chaired Zambia's official creditor committee in 2023, negotiations were protracted due to coordination challenges between bilateral creditors and private bondholders.¹¹⁸ Multipolarity provided Zambia with multiple financing partners, but it did not alter the underlying extractive export model. Thus, diplomatic diversification did not prevent structural vulnerability.

¹¹⁴ International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Zambia: Request for an Arrangement Under the Extended Credit Facility—Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Zambia*, IMF Country Report No. 22/292 (Washington, DC: IMF, 2022), <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2022/09/06/Zambia-Request-for-an-Arrangement-Under-the-Extended-Credit-Facility-Press-Release-Staff-523196>.

¹¹⁵ World Bank, *International Debt Statistics 2022* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36289>.

¹¹⁶ Matthew T. Page et al., "Zambia's Debt Crisis," Chatham House Research Paper, 2021.

¹¹⁷ World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2022* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022), <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/>.

¹¹⁸ Official Creditor Committee (OCC), "Press Release: The Paris Club Welcomes Zambia's Debt Restructuring Agreement under the G20-Paris Club Common Framework," June 23, 2023, [https://clubdeparis.org/files/live/sites/clubdeparis/files/contributed/02%20Actualit%C3%A9s-PJ%20et%20image\(s\)/2023/PR-Zambia-CommonFramework-20230623.pdf](https://clubdeparis.org/files/live/sites/clubdeparis/files/contributed/02%20Actualit%C3%A9s-PJ%20et%20image(s)/2023/PR-Zambia-CommonFramework-20230623.pdf).

Synthesis and Implications: Southern Africa in a Multipolar Context

The comparative analysis of Zimbabwe, South Africa, Mozambique, and Zambia demonstrates that multipolarity expands strategic options for Southern African states but does not automatically translate into meaningful agency. Across cases, states adopt diversification and hedging strategies, engaging simultaneously with multiple external powers, including China, the EU, the US, Russia, and emerging partners to secure investment, aid, and security assistance.¹¹⁹ Zimbabwe's "Look East Policy" emerged in response to Western sanctions and signaled a shift toward alternative external partnerships. Its engagement with Chinese infrastructure financing, as well as Mozambique's parallel security arrangements, demonstrates strategies of selective alignment aimed at securing immediate benefits.¹²⁰ Through its engagement in BRICS, South Africa pursues a multi-alignment strategy that reflects middle-power diplomacy, balancing ties with both Western and non-Western actors to strengthen its regional role.¹²¹

However, these strategies are structurally constrained, reflecting the enduring relevance of Dependency Theory. All four states remain heavily reliant on external finance, foreign direct investment, and primary commodity exports, which create asymmetric power relations and limit autonomy in policy decision-making.¹²² Debt distress in Zambia, resource dependence in Mozambique, sanctions-induced isolation in Zimbabwe, and South Africa's domestic economic stagnation underscore that multipolarity does not dissolve structural inequalities.¹²³ In this sense, Southern African agency is bounded, consistent with the neorealist notion that states operate within constraints imposed by global power hierarchies and material capabilities.¹²⁴

Regionalism shapes the scope of agency. Although SADC and AU engagement provide platforms for collective bargaining and normative coordination, fragmentation, divergent interests, and limited institutional capacity constrain their effectiveness. Mozambique's dual-track security strategy, involving both SADC and Rwandan forces, reflects selective regional engagement in response to institutional limitations and external pressures. South Africa's contested regional leader-

¹¹⁹ Alden and Schoeman, "South Africa in the Company of Giants," 111–29.

¹²⁰ Vines, "The Evolving International Response to the Cabo Delgado Crisis."

¹²¹ Habib, *South Africa's Suspended Revolution*.

¹²² Samir Amin, "Underdevelopment and Dependence in Black Africa—Origins and Contemporary Forms," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 10, no. 4 (1972): 503–24.

¹²³ Bräutigam, "A Critical Look at Chinese 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy,'" 1–14.

¹²⁴ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

ship similarly shows that middle-power agency depends on domestic capacity and regional legitimacy.¹²⁵

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest several imperatives. First, Southern African states must align external engagement with coherent national development strategies that prioritize economic diversification, industrialization, and institutional capacity-building. Second, enhancing transparency, monitoring, and accountability in managing foreign investment and aid is critical to prevent debt crises, elite capture, and ineffective outcomes. Third, strengthening regional institutions is essential to consolidate collective bargaining power, manage external competition, and coordinate responses to security and development challenges.

Thus, Southern Africa's experience in a multipolar world illustrates a tension between opportunity and structural constraint. Multipolarity offers flexibility and strategic options, but meaningful agency is contingent on domestic governance, institutional strength, and regional cohesion. Viewed through Dependency Theory, neorealist frameworks, and Regionalism, the analysis shows that external power competition both expands and constrains Southern African agency: states can maneuver strategically but cannot fully escape structural asymmetries in the global system.¹²⁶

Conclusion

Southern Africa's experience in an increasingly multipolar international order reveals a region moving through a wider diplomatic field without escaping the economic hierarchies that continue to shape its choices. The spread of power across a broader range of actors has created more room for engagement, wider access to finance, and greater flexibility in foreign policy. China, the US, the EU, Russia, and BRICS-related platforms have all expanded the field in which Southern African states operate. Yet expanded access to partners has not carried the region into a fundamentally different position in the global political economy. The central pattern running through the article is one of wider diplomatic opportunity alongside persistent structural exposure.

The four case studies sharpen this point. Zimbabwe's turn toward non-Western partners opened channels of survival and adaptation under sanctions, preserving diplomatic space at a moment of severe isolation. That shift mattered politically, but it did little to resolve the deeper burdens of debt, institutional fragility, and weak productive transformation. Mozambique entered multipolarity through a

¹²⁵ Alden and Schoeman, "South Africa in the Company of Giants," 111–29.

¹²⁶ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa*.

different route, shaped by natural gas, foreign capital, and escalating insecurity. External interest surrounding Cabo Delgado seemed to promise an economic breakthrough. What followed was a more complicated picture in which energy wealth drew in investors, security actors, and regional institutions, while the state remained heavily dependent on external capabilities.

Zambia's trajectory speaks directly to the promises and risks of diversified external finance. Chinese lending, Eurobond issuance, and large infrastructure projects appeared to offer a path toward accelerated development. The debt crisis that followed showed how quickly this strategy could narrow national room for action once fiscal strain deepened and commodity dependence remained intact. South Africa, with greater institutional capacity and diplomatic reach than its regional counterparts, has pursued multi-alignment with notable sophistication. Its role in BRICS, the AU, and SADC, together with ties to Western markets, has given Pretoria unusual strategic breadth. Even there, domestic stagnation, financial vulnerability, and contested regional authority place clear limits on influence.

Taken together, these cases bring into focus a particular kind of agency. Southern African states negotiate, hedge, recalibrate, and exploit openings created by rivalry among larger powers. They are active participants in the making of their external relationships. At the same time, their choices unfold within economies marked by commodity concentration, exposure to external finance, weak industrial depth, and uneven state capacity. Diplomatic flexibility has grown faster than the material foundations required to turn that flexibility into durable autonomy. That gap is one of the most important conclusions of the study.

The regional dimension adds another layer. SADC and the AU continue to matter as arenas of coordination, legitimacy, and collective voice. They offer platforms through which Southern African governments can frame common concerns, defend regional priorities, and reduce the isolating effects of purely bilateral bargaining. Their political value is real. Yet the record examined here suggests that diplomatic presence and institutional effectiveness remain far apart. Regional action still depends heavily on the will, resources, and calculations of member states. Divergent interests, uneven capacities, and limited enforcement weaken collective follow-through. The response to Cabo Delgado captured this tension with unusual clarity. Regional engagement existed, but operational coherence remained fragile, and bilateral action moved more quickly than the regional mechanism itself.

The wider theoretical implication lies in the distinction between diplomatic maneuverability and structural economic agency. Multipolarity has changed the setting in which Southern African states pursue their interests. It has multiplied interlocutors, widened access points, and reduced the older pattern of dependence

on a narrow circle of Western actors. That change is significant. Even so, a broader diplomatic field does not by itself reorder production, trade, finance, or technological capacity. Southern Africa still confronts a world economy in which value is concentrated elsewhere, borrowing costs are shaped externally, and development ambitions remain vulnerable to commodity shocks and capital volatility. Once these conditions are taken seriously, the agency appears less as a fixed possession and more as a negotiated capacity whose scope rises and falls with domestic institutions, fiscal resilience, and regional coherence.

For that reason, the long-term significance of multipolarity for Southern Africa will depend on what states do with the room they have gained. The availability of multiple partners can create leverage, ease isolation, and open new channels of cooperation. Those opportunities matter. Their developmental value, however, will remain limited unless they are tied to stronger institutions, more disciplined management of debt and investment, broader productive diversification, and more effective regional coordination. Southern Africa has entered a wider diplomatic world, yet it still carries the weight of inherited asymmetries that no shift in global power can erase. The most persuasive reading of the evidence is sober. Multipolarity has expanded strategic space, though the quality and consequences of that space continue to depend on domestic strength, regional organization, and the difficult work of economic transformation.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is a fundamental and comprehensive work of ancient Indian political thought, centered on the principles and practice of statecraft. It encompasses various fields of state governance, ranging from domestic administration to foreign policy. The significance of the *Arthashastra* lies not only in its theoretical sophistication but also in its foundation in Kautilya's (Chanakya's) practical experience of governance, shaped through his influential role at the court of King Chandragupta. For this reason, the *Arthashastra* is considered an exemplary combination of theoretical knowledge and the author's rich background in the military and political spheres. The *Arthashastra* reflects both Kautilya's practical experience in governance and his engagement with the broader tradition of ancient Indian strategic thought. Recognized as a strategist, statesman, and influential state-builder, Kautilya embedded these experiences and perspectives into a systematic framework of statecraft, diplomacy, and political power.

Kautilya observes the model of the state as a part of a combined and naturally unified set of seven elements: (i) the king; (ii) [the group of] councilors, ministers and other high officials (the *amatya*); (iii) the territory of the state along with the population inhabiting it (the *janapada*); (iv) the fortified towns and cities (the *dur-*

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ga); (v) the treasury (kosa, the wealth of the State); (vi) the forces of defense (of law and order) and (vii) the allies (6.1.1; 97). It is precisely owing to the harmony of these abovementioned elements that the state can function viably; otherwise, it will weaken and be conquered by enemies. From this perspective, Kautilya can be regarded as one of the earliest political thinkers to articulate a systemic conception of the state. In the *Arthashastra*, the state emerges as a complex assemblage of interdependent elements extending beyond the ruler and the army, whose collective strength and effective interaction underpin political stability, resilience, and long-term viability. Consequently, he can be considered one of the architects of the concept of institutional monarchy in world history. The king requires a state apparatus (institutions) to execute his will. This, however, does not imply that Kautilya diminishes the role of the king or royal authority. He views the king precisely as the guarantor of the state and the bearer of absolute responsibility for its defense.

What, then, are the necessary qualities of a king? Kautilya develops a comprehensive and systematic response to this fundamental question, one that served as a guiding framework for the ancient Indian state and continued to shape political and strategic thought in subsequent centuries. For Kautilya, an ideal king is one who possesses the supreme qualities of leadership, intellect, energy, and personal attributes. The qualities of the king's intellect are a desire to learn, listening to others, grasping, retaining, understanding thoroughly, and reflecting on knowledge, rejecting false views and adhering to the true ones (6.1.1; 97). Essentially, Kautilya puts forth the concept of enlightened monarchy, which was formed in Europe much later. He develops the idea that the governance of the state by the king is not based solely on whims. It is carried out through a rational, intelligent, and well-calculated approach to state affairs—that is, from a position of pragmatism. In this work, the king's power also implies service to the people. In other words, the king possesses absolute power, but this power is not an end in itself. It serves the welfare of his subjects, which, in turn, is the primary source of the king's bliss. Kautilya essentially considers a king's laziness to be destructive to the state, as his inaction and carelessness can serve as a bad example for his subjects and become a significant advantage to his enemies.

Thus, according to Kautilya, institutionalism is the form (mechanism) of state governance, while enlightened governance is its content (purpose). The seven elements presented by Kautilya are the skeleton and body of the state, and the ideology of enlightened governance is the soul that breathes life into it. From this perspective, the relationship between form and content can be compared to the unity of body and soul. In this context, there is a striking similarity between Eastern thought—represented by Kautilya—and Western thought—represented by Aristo-

tle, who also speaks of the relationship between soul and body in his work *Politics*. Furthermore, we find a significant commonality in the perceptions of these two major figures of the ancient world regarding similar issues. Aristotle notes that any human being consists, first of all, of a soul and a body, of which, by their very nature, one is the ruling principle and the other is the subject principle.¹

According to Aristotle, within every human being, one can principally observe both a despotic (absolute) and a political authority. The soul rules over the body as a master, while the intellect rules over human desires like a statesman.² Kautilya approaches this issue with equal gravity and importance. He considers self-control to be one of the king's most vital qualities: "Self-control, which is the basis of knowledge and discipline, is acquired by giving up lust, anger, greed, conceit, arrogance, and foolhardiness. Living in accordance with the shastras means avoiding over-indulgence in all pleasures of [the senses, i.e.,] hearing, touch, sight, taste and smell" (1.6.1–2; 121). Though Kautilya and Aristotle represent different civilizations, their ideas about the inner structure of the human being and the art of governance likely follow the same logic: a hierarchy of soul and body, where the governance of the state begins with the internal self-governance of the individual. A central theme in both authors' works is that an individual (the king) cannot govern others or the state unless he governs his own body and passions through reason.

Kautilya also defines a unique "indexing" of state power for the ancient world, one that does not depend solely on a strong army. He posits that the real power of a state is formed by a combination of strategic intelligence (mind), economic might (the treasury), and internal will (energy). In modern political science, this unique "indexing" is viewed as a combination of hard and soft power. The *Arthashastra* emphasizes the complementarity of domestic and foreign policy as a fundamental condition of effective statecraft. It posits that foreign policy success is contingent upon internal stability and cohesion, and that external ambitions depend fundamentally on a consolidated domestic foundation of power.

Kautilya consistently demonstrates a systemic approach to state policy issues. The systemic logic of the *Arthashastra* is particularly evident in Kautilya's treatment of foreign policy. His Mandala Theory, or Theory of the Circle of States, conceptualizes interstate relations as a structured geopolitical system shaped by geography, proximity, and relative power. Within this framework, the six methods of foreign policy—peace, hostility, neutrality, military preparation, alliance-

¹ Aristotle, *Politika* [Politics], trans. S. A. Zhebelev and T. A. Miller (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo AST, 2018), 13 (bk. 1, chap. 2, 1254a35) [Аристотель, *Политика*, пер. С. А. Жебелева и Т. А. Миллер (Москва: Издательство АСТ, 2018), 13 (кн. I, гл. 2, 1254a35)].

² Aristotle, *Politics*, 13 (bk. 1, chap. 2, 1254b5–10).

seeking, and dual policy—form a coherent strategic repertoire through which both strong and weak rulers can pursue security, preserve autonomy, and advance their political interests.

In the context of the state's foreign policy, Kautilya discusses the concept of the "natural enemy," which at first sight seems to contradict the famous principle of classical political thought that "there are no permanent enemies, only permanent interests." However, Kautilya does not contradict this golden rule of diplomacy, as he clearly notes: "Even an enemy who helps is fit to be allied with, not an ally who does not act like one" (7.13.27; 511). Thus, the characteristic feature of Kautilya's approach is that geography dictates interstate relations, and the permanent interest of the state is determined by its geographical position. Accordingly, if an enemy is "natural" (an immediate neighbor sharing a border), then for interests to change, the borders themselves must change.

However, the value of Kautilya's work lies in the fact that, in the context of foreign policy, he does not limit himself solely to advising a victorious king. Kautilya's theory would be incomplete if he did not also focus on the adverse realities of statecraft. Recognizing the inherent instability of political power, including the possibility that a ruler may be defeated or overthrown by a stronger rival, Kautilya also elaborates a systematic framework governing the conduct of weaker kings under conditions of strategic asymmetry. In this regard, Kautilya resembles the scientist-artist later described by Niccolò Machiavelli in the preface of his work *The Prince*, in a letter addressed to Lorenzo de' Medici. Machiavelli observes, "Just as artists who draw landscapes get down in the valley to study the mountains and go up to the mountains to look down on the valley, so one has to be a prince to get to know the character of a people and a man of the people to know the character of a prince."³ Similarly, Kautilya ascends to the "mountain peak" to advise the conquering king on how to crush the enemy, and then descends into the "valley" to the position of the weak king, explaining how to survive when the aggressor is incomparably more powerful. Kautilya notes: "The weaker king shall offer, by one means or another, that which the other will, in any case, take by force. It is life that is worth preserving, not wealth which, being impermanent, can be given up without regrets." (12.1.32; 624)

Here, his pragmatism is demonstrated once again. Kautilya avoids extreme positions and warns against blind submission and thoughtless courage. He argues that when resistance is unlikely to succeed, it is preferable to concede what would otherwise be taken by force, thereby preserving survival and maintaining the capacity for renewed struggle under more favorable conditions in the future.

³ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Tim Parks (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 4.

Kautilya never advocates unjustified maximalism in his work. He consistently argues from the position of political realism (*Realpolitik*), demonstrating absolute pragmatism free from unnecessary moralizing. Thus, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* represents a work of enduring global significance, offering a systematic account of how states can safeguard their strategic interests while pursuing expansionary objectives. It continues to constitute a valuable reference point for research in foreign policy, diplomacy, and historical studies. It is therefore essential to introduce this fundamental historical work more widely to the global and local academic communities.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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