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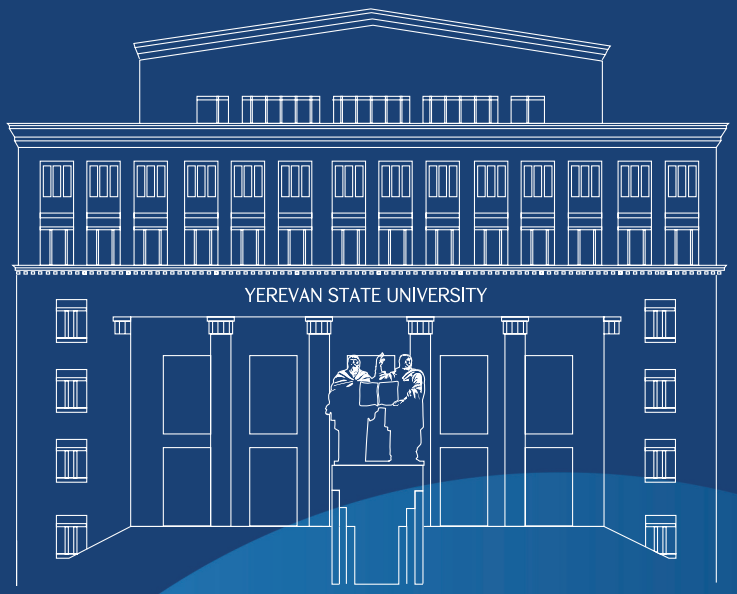

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POLARIZATION, TRANSACTIONALISM AND SMALL STATES IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM: NAVIGATING A FRACTURED ORDER

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Abstract

It is widely recognized that the global order is undergoing significant strategic transformations. While these shifts are frequently attributed to heightened geopolitical competition, relatively less scholarly attention has been directed towards the internal dynamics within states, particularly the role of political polarization, in amplifying international tensions. Increasingly polarized domestic politics, coupled with nationalist orientations toward foreign policy, compromise bipartisan consensus and foster transactional, self-interested behavior in international relations. This paper examines the relationship between domestic political polarization and transactional approaches to foreign policy, focusing especially, though not exclusively, on the administration of US President Donald Trump. It explores how these tendencies undermine established international security norms, institutions, and mechanisms. Additionally, the article assesses current and anticipated responses from small states as they adapt to the profound transformations reshaping the international system.

Keywords: *polarization, multipolarity, transactionalism, multilateralism, Asia-Pacific, New Zealand.*

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Introduction

Heightened strategic tension, protracted conflicts, and greater trade protectionism are shaping the current global environment. The New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Strategic Intentions 2024-2028 document identifies three 'big shifts' in the international order that will fundamentally alter how we see and shape our place in the world: "1. A shift from rules to power. This is a shift towards a 'multipolar' world, characterized by a period during which rules are more contested and relative power between states has a greater role in shaping international affairs. 2. A shift from economics to security. This is a shift in which economic relationships are reassessed in light of increased military competition in a more securitized and less stable world. 3. A shift from efficiency to resilience. This is a shift in factors driving economic behavior. Building resilience and addressing social and sustainability issues will become more prominent economic drivers for countries."[1]

US President Donald Trump's radical foreign policy steps are adding uncertainty and disruption to the international order. They reflect the deepening political polarization in the United States and internationally. Yet, despite the growing interest in how polarization affects domestic politics, less research has been done on how polarization influences international cooperation and conflict.[2]

This article will examine how divisive political agendas, the narrowing of national interests, and the prevalence of threats versus opportunities perceptions not only enhance rivalry and conflict between states but also polarize tension between international norms, rules, and mechanisms. Particular attention will be paid to the challenges of the phenomenon of transactionalism in foreign policy to the values-based partnerships and multilateral cooperation. The resultant evolution of the regional security architecture in the Asia-Pacific and perspectives from small states, such as New Zealand, will be considered in more detail.

Political Polarization

Political polarization is understood as a division of society into distinct and opposing ideological camps. This results in the erosion of consensus, collaboration, and constructive dialogue, leading to a widening gap between political groups in terms of their values, beliefs, and policy preferences. Polarization is more than a disagreement. It fosters an "us versus them" mentality, where opposing sides view each

[1] "Strategic Intentions" (Wellington: New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024), https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/About-us-Corporate/MFAT-strategies-and-frameworks/Strategic-Intentions-2024-2028.pdf.

[2] Rachel Myrick, *Polarization and International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2025).

other not just as adversaries, but as existential threats.[3] Polarization, which manifests itself very strongly in the United States and several European countries, is not limited to established democracies. In emerging democracies, the lack of robust institutions and the presence of charismatic, divisive leaders often exacerbate polarization.[4]

Globalization is viewed as a major cause of rising political populism. The globalization shocks, often working through culture and identity, have played an important role in driving up support for populist, particularly right-wing, movements.[5] A phenomenon known as "affective polarization" emphasizes that the divide is deeply rooted in the perception of political opponents as threats to one's way of life and core values.[6]

According to Tigran Grigoryan, the head of the Yerevan-based Regional Center for Democracy, this de-legitimization is narrowing the space for political dialogue in the country: "when you claim that your opponent is not just a mere political opponent, but a danger, a 'Turkish agent,' a 'Soros person,' or similar labels, there is a chance you will use this as grounds for resorting to non-constitutional and non-democratic means for overthrowing your opponent."[7]

Challenges to Consensual Foreign and National Security Policies

Populism transcends domestic politics by politicizing foreign policy, in the sense of defining and articulating foreign policy preferences in opposition to political predecessors, using foreign policy as an instrument and ground to battle opponents.[8]

President Trump's accusation of the Biden and Obama administrations in allowing the war in Ukraine to happen or the Armenian opposition's criticism of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's handling of the Karabakh conflict are good examples

[3] Simon Chkuaseli, "The Divided World: Understanding Political Polarization and Its Global Impact," *Eustochos*, December 15, 2024, https://eustochos.com/the-divided-world-understanding-political-polarization-and-its-global-impact/.
[4] Tobias Bunde, "The New Age of Multipolarisation," *Bangkok Post*, February 11, 2025, https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2959343/the-new-age-of-multipolarisation.
[5] Dani Rodrik, "Why Does Globalization Fuel Populism? Economics, Culture, and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism," *Annual Review of Economics* 13, no. 1 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-070220-032416.
[6] Carl-Johan Karlsson, "Divided We Stand: The Rise of Political Animosity," *Knowable Magazine*, August 2024, https://doi.org/10.1146/knowable-081924-1.
[7] Anna Pambukhchyan, "Armenia Grapples with Political Polarisation," *Euractiv*, July 23, 2024, https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/armenia-grapples-with-political-polarisation/.
[8] David Cadier, "Foreign Policy as the Continuation of Domestic Politics by Other Means: Pathways and Patterns of Populist Politicization," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 20, no. 1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orad035.

of that. Domestic polarization thus leads to increased challenges to bipartisan foreign policy.

Political polarization also weakens the ability of government agencies to respond effectively to national security threats. Polarized political parties are less likely to cooperate and compromise, resulting in policy stalemates that leave the country vulnerable to external threats. It can lead to diminished trust in government institutions and officials and undermine the legitimacy of national security policies and the government's ability to implement them.[9]

Surveys show that the American public is increasingly divided about the role of the NATO alliance and the war in Ukraine. Most continue to believe the United States benefits from its NATO membership, but partisan differences on ratings of NATO have widened in recent years. Three-quarters of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents rate the organization favorably, while only 43% of Republicans and Republican leaders agree, down from 55% in a 2022 survey conducted soon after Russia invaded Ukraine. Attitudes toward the war in Ukraine have evolved to reflect the partisan polarization. Democrats and Republicans differ sharply on views about aid to Ukraine, ratings of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and whether supporting Ukraine helps or hurts the US interests. While the share of Democrats who believe the US is not doing enough to help Ukraine declined after the initial onset of the war, it has increased more recently. Currently, 36% of Democrats say the US is not providing enough aid. In contrast, just 13% of Republicans say the US is not giving enough support to Ukraine, while 49% believe it is giving too much. At the beginning of the war, Republican attitudes were essentially the reverse: 49% said the US was not providing enough aid, and 9% said it was providing too much. Among Republicans, conservatives are more likely than moderates and liberals to say the US is providing too much aid to Ukraine.[10]

Internal political division in post-Soviet Georgia between the ruling Georgian Dream and its opponents jeopardizes Georgia's prospects for EU membership. It is driven by both geopolitical and ideological factors. While the governing party holds conservative, nationalist, and increasingly pro-Russian views, the opposition forces primarily include pro-Western, pro-LGBT, and pro-democratic members. The rivalry between the two factions is so intense that they even disagree on who is responsible for the launching of the 2008 war: Russia or Georgia?[11]

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[9] Rana Danish Nisar, "Political Polarization and National Security: Challenges and Solutions," *World Geostrategic Insights*, April 14, 2023, https://www.wgi.world/political-polarization-and-national-security-challenges-and-solutions/.

[10] Richard Wike, Moira Fagan, Sneha Gubbala, and Sarah Austin, "Growing Partisan Divisions over NATO and Ukraine," *Pew Research Center*, May 8, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/05/08/growing-partisan-divisions-over-nato-and-ukraine/.

[11] "Internal Divisions in Georgia Threaten Its European Dream," *Majalla*, 2023, https://en.majalla.com/node/296146/politics/internal-divisions-georgia-threaten-its-european-dream.

The Sweden-based V-Dem Institute has highlighted the negative impact of political polarization on Armenia's democracy as both the opposition and government are trying to delegitimize their political opponents by presenting each other as a threat to Armenia's independence and sovereignty.[12]

In Asia, South Korean politics have become deeply polarized in recent years, resulting in significant political conflict and division between parties. While the declaration of martial law on December 3, 2024, by President Yoon Suk Yeol was an extreme and anachronistic decision, it was a dramatic reflection of long-standing political polarization, rather than a spontaneous response.[13] The escalating partisan polarization and entrenched political divisions pose significant vulnerabilities to South Korea's foreign policy. Political leaders in the country often frame foreign policy as a wedge issue, aiming to divide the public and secure their political constituency by forcing binary choices. This trend is evident in South Korea's policies toward Japan and North Korea. Public opinion is sharply divided along partisan lines: PPP supporters generally back the Yoon government's efforts to improve Korea-Japan relations and its deterrence-oriented North Korean policy, while the DP opposition is critical of those moves.[14]

In New Zealand, the opposition Labour Party and the ruling National Party are becoming more and more divided on the country's historically bipartisan foreign and security policies. The National party-led right-wing coalition favors a closer relationship with the US, arguing that the country can maintain its autonomy even after forming a strategic alliance with the United States. The Labour Party, on the other hand, continues to advocate for an independent, values-based foreign policy.[15] There are significant and justified concerns that the growing political polarization may undermine international policy coordination or even challenge the international order more generally. However, while making international cooperation more difficult, it should also make it more desirable. International agreements

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[12] Anna Pambukhchyan, "Armenia Grapples with Political Polarisation," *Euractiv*, July 23, 2024, https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/armenia-grapples-with-political-polarisation/.

[13] Mitch Shin, "Yoon's Martial Law Declaration Was Bad. What He Did Next May Have Been Worse," *The Diplomat*, March 7, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/03/yoons-martial-law-declaration-was-bad-what-he-did-next-may-have-been-worse/.

[14] Yul Sohn and Won-Taek Kang, "How Polarization Undermines Democracy in South Korea," *Council of Councils*, 2025, https://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/global-memos/how-polarization-undermines-democracy-south-korea.

[15] Danyl McLauchlan, "Danyl McLauchlan: Why Donald Trump Is Shunning Europe—and What It Means for NZ," *NZ Herald*, March 2, 2025, https://www.nzherald.co.nz/the-listener/politics/danyl-mclauchlan-why-donald-trump-is-shunning-europe-and-what-it-means-for-nz/4UVPLO4DXNDONPAH33DHMBTSIM/.

could constrain domestic policymakers' more radical policies by forcing them to cooperate with other, hopefully more moderate, foreign policymakers.[16]

At the same time, domestic political polarization has its benefits in democratizing countries as it undermines the dominance of a single narrative on important issues, such as security or foreign policy. As Naira Sultanyan from the Democracy Development Foundation (former OSF-Armenia) points out, "it may sound odd, but polarization is even necessary as it helps to debate and discuss issues which have been taboo for ages."[17]

Transformative Transactionalism

Polarization may be the most consistent effect of populism**,** as it is integral to the logic of constructing populist subjects. In foreign policy, populist regimes are increasingly applying a transactional approach.[18] A transactionalist foreign policy is inherently connected to domestic policy concerns, as well as being often associated with populist leaders. These populist leaders are looking for quick, splashy results that can be sold to domestic audiences for political benefit and lead to foreign policy decisions that have been considered impulsive.[19]

Transactional foreign policy tends to be more opportunistic, with a focus on immediate gains often at the expense of long-term relationships or shared values. While relational foreign policy emphasizes long-term relationships and cooperation, transactional foreign policy prioritizes short-term gains and tangible benefits.[20] It has similarities with realism in its distrust of international organizations, distaste for value-based policymaking, and ideological dispositions. It, however, differs from realism by using foreign policy decisions to score points in domestic politics. Also, transactionalism's objective of striking populist goals at home means that transactionalist foreign policy may interfere in the internal affairs of other

[16] Carsten Hefeker and Michael Neugart, "Political Polarization and International Cooperation," *European Journal of Political Economy* 78 (May 2023): 102401, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2023.102401.
[17] Anna Pambukhchyan, "Armenia Grapples with Political Polarisation," *Euractiv*, July 23, 2024, https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/armenia-grapples-with-political-polarisation/.
[18] Kenneth M. Roberts, "Populism and Polarization in Comparative Perspective: Constitutive, Spatial and Institutional Dimensions," *Government and Opposition* 57, no. 4 (2021): 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.14.
[19] Galib Bashirov and Ihsan Yilmaz, "The Rise of Transactionalism in International Relations: Evidence from Turkey's Relations with the European Union," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74, no. 2 (2019): 165–84, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2019.1693495.
[20] "Relational Foreign Policy vs. Transactional Foreign Policy—What's the Difference?" *This vs. That*, 2023, https://thisvsthat.io/relational-foreign-policy-vs-transactional-foreign-policy.

countries.[21] US President Trump, for example, has already been doing that in relation to Canada, Greenland, and Panama. One of the key features of transactional foreign policy is its focus on bilateral relationships and individual transactions. Transactional foreign policy focuses on maximizing economic or strategic advantages through negotiations and deals with other countries.[22]

The chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, James E. Risch (R-ID), openly uses the term "transactionalism" to characterize the Trump administration's approach to foreign policy.[23] For decades, the United States projected global influence through "soft power' – the ability to shape world affairs through cultural appeal, diplomatic engagement, and ideological attraction. Under President Donald Trump's administration, this traditional approach to international relations is undergoing a fundamental transformation. President Trump sees himself as the leader of a global movement aimed at eviscerating liberalism at home and abroad.[24]

In his first administration, Donald Trump's "America First" doctrine reshaped foreign policy, emphasizing economic nationalism, skepticism of military alliances, and a focus on domestic priorities over international commitments. The second Trump administration further seeks to re-evaluate military commitments abroad, reduce foreign aid, and pressure allies to contribute more to their defense, fueling concerns over the extent of US involvement and alliance commitments overseas.[25]

Interestingly, even the Democrats in the US Congress appear to be slowly softening towards Russia and becoming more suspicious of America's long-standing allies. It is not clear yet whether these small changes are enduring shifts in opinion.[26] President Trump's actions are alarming America's allies. His tariffs, disregard for the rule of law, and tough policies on migrants, affirmative action, and climate

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[21] Galib Bashirov and Ihsan Yilmaz, "The Rise of Transactionalism in International Relations: Evidence from Turkey's Relations with the European Union," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74, no. 2 (2019): 165–84, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2019.1693495.

[22] "Relational Foreign Policy vs. Transactional Foreign Policy—What's the Difference?" *This vs. That*, 2023, https://thisvsthat.io/relational-foreign-policy-vs-transactional-foreign-policy.

[23] Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Rischian Transactionalism," *Ethics & International Affairs*, 2019, https://www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/online-exclusives/rischian-transactionalism.

[24] Kurt Davis Jr., "Trump Is Redefining, Not Abandoning, American Soft Power," *Asia Times*, April 2025, https://asiatimes.com/2025/04/trump-is-redefining-not-abandoning-american-soft-power.

[25] Timothy S. Rich, "New Poll: Does 'America First' Mean Abandoning Taiwan and Korea?" *Asia Times*, April 2025, https://asiatimes.com/2025/04/new-polling-does-america-first-mean-abandoning-taiwan-and-korea/?utm_source=The+Daily+Report&utm_campaign=8fe7d4c839-DAILY_01_04_2025_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1f8bca137f-8fe7d4c839-31542117&mc_cid=8fe7d4c839&mc_eid=1e66540ed9.

[26] The Economist, "Schooled by Trump, Americans Are Learning to Dislike Their Allies," *The Economist*, March 31, 2025, https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2025/03/31/schooled-by-trump-americans-are-learning-to-dislike-their-allies.

change have seen voters outside the US react with self-protective patriotism.[27] Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy is being matched by a transformational approach from long-time allies who continue to emphasize values-based foreign policy and partnership.

Friedrich Merz, Germany's new leader, has publicly expressed concerns about developments in the United States under Donald Trump's presidency. He has urged Europe to "achieve independence from the US" - words, he added, that "I would never have thought I would have to say."[28]

Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer demonstratively warmly greeted Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky with a hug outside Downing Street as the two leaders held talks after the Ukrainian President's bruising encounter with US President Trump in the White House.[29] French President Emanuel Macron has raised the specter of extending his country's sovereign nuclear deterrent to provide a security umbrella for allied European nations.[30]

Two-thirds of Australians believe America cannot be trusted as a security partner and want a more independent defense policy: 64% of them have little or no trust in America to "act responsibly."[31]

In her recent newspaper article, former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark warned the New Zealand government against aligning with the United States to ensure that New Zealand's security and prosperity continue to depend on foreign policy choices that reflect core values and national interests. "New Zealand must prioritize peace, multilateralism, and regional stability. In an increasingly uncertain world, our best strategy is independence, not subservience," says Helen Clark.[32] In the develop-

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[27] Grant Duncan, "A 'Trump Slump' Has Lifted the Left in Canada and Now Australia—What Are the Lessons for NZ?" *RNZ*, May 5, 2025, https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/559972/a-trump-slump-has-lifted-the-left-in-canada-and-now-australia-what-are-the-lessons-for-nz.

[28] Giselle Ruhiyyih Ewing and Hans von der Burchard, "The US Is 'No Longer the America We Used to Know,' Warns Germany's Merz," *POLITICO*, February 5, 2025, https://www.politico.eu/article/us-politics-germany-eu-europe-donald-trump-friedrich-merz-white-house/.

[29] Iwan Stone and Lettice Bromovsky, "NATO Issues Dire Warning to Volodymyr Zelensky as Keir Starmer Hugs Him at No10 amid Frantic Talks...," *Mail Online*, March 2025, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14450319/Zelensky-arrives-Downing-Street-meet-Keir-Starmer-bruising-White-House-encounter-Donald-Trump-pair-prepare-crisis-Ukraine-talks-European-leaders-tomorrow.html.

[30] RNZ News, "Exit Stage Right: Trump Blows up the West as We Know It as America's Allies Flinch," *RNZ*, April 6, 2025, https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/world/557345/exit-stage-right-trump-blows-up-the-west-as-we-know-it-as-america-s-allies-flinch.

[31] "Aussies Are Doing a Political Pivot," *The Economist*, May 2025, https://www.economist.com/asia/2025/05/01/aussies-are-doing-a-political-pivot.

[32] Helen Clark, "Opinion: Helen Clark and Marco de Jong—Subservience Puts New Zealand's Sovereignty and Security at Risk," *NZ Herald*, May 2, 2025, https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/opinion-

ing world, Donald Trump's transactional foreign policy has met less resistance as many developing countries avoid following values-based foreign policy due to pragmatic, nationalistic, or authoritarian types of their leadership. India is one such example. According to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement has inspired MIGA, or "Make India Great Again."[33]

The leaders of Southeast Asian countries of ASEAN do not seem to be bothered when Trump's United States speaks less about the liberal rules-based order and puts more stress on transactional engagement. They have been known for being quintessentially pragmatic, advancing their own interests — especially economic interests — and hedging between major powers. The willingness to be open to all sides, despite differences in governing ideology, has been emphasized time and again across Southeast Asia.[34]

It is clear that under President Donald Trump, the traditional American approach to international relations is undergoing a fundamental transformation. However, it may not be about completely abandoning the US leadership or "soft power" but could be perhaps viewed as a recalibration for a world where old rules no longer apply. While the Trump administration currently prioritizes tangible returns over ideological appeal, this may reverse in the future. Moreover, there is definitely a need to reassess America's strategic allies and their capabilities in favor of more flexible and effective partnership frameworks.[35]

Implications for Multilateralism and Regional Security

The same ASEAN and other small nations are, however, much less comfortable with the transactionalist policy's restrained, if not hostile, approach to multilateralism. It challenges the very notion of ASEAN centrality in the Asia-Pacific and limits the smaller nations' opportunities to promote their interests in multilateral formats.

ASEAN's inclusive, consensus-based approach to security has provided smaller states with a platform to collectively engage larger powers. Trump's open skepticism of such institutions, coupled with his administration's inconsistent participation in ASEAN summits and related forums, threatens to marginalize the organiza-

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[33] The Economist, "India Is Benefiting from Trump 2.0," *The Economist*, March 13, 2025, https://www.economist.com/asia/2025/03/13/india-is-benefiting-from-trump-20.

[34] Anthony Milner, "ASEAN Adapts and Advances as Global Politics Shift," *East Asia Forum*, February 24, 2025, https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/02/25/asean-adapts-and-advances-as-global-politics-shift/.

[35] Kurt Davis Jr., "Trump Is Redefining, Not Abandoning, American Soft Power," *Asia Times*, April 2025, https://asiatimes.com/2025/04/trump-is-redefining-not-abandoning-american-soft-power.

tion's role in shaping regional security dynamics. The "bilateralization" of US involvement puts ASEAN's already waning centrality at even greater risk of losing its normative clout and strengthening power imbalances that benefit extra-regional players with greater coercive capabilities.[36]

In addition, the declining mutual trust between major Asian powers, such as between India and Pakistan, or Japan and China, accompanied by rising nationalism, increases uncertainties in the security environment of the Asia-Pacific region and endangers the post-Cold War security multilateralism in Asia.[37]

The Indo-Pacific is likely to confront a wider and more dangerous security vacuum. Washington's allies and close partners, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan, are openly questioning the reliability of the United States in honoring its security commitments. President Trump's transactional approach to diplomacy elevates concerns about flashpoints where tensions are already running high: The South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula, and the Taiwan Strait. Voices are being raised to develop national nuclear capabilities.[38]

In light of deepening major power rivalry and shortcomings of large-scale multilateralism, minilateralism has emerged as an alternative format of choice for several regional countries. Recent minilateral initiatives, such as QUAD and AUKUS, have been regarded as the building blocks of an "Indo-Pacific" regional architecture amid the advancement of the new regional construct. It is premised on smaller groupings akin to "coalitions of the willing" or "like-minded" arrangements.[39] The purpose and value of such minilaterals are being vigorously debated in the region. For some, they are exclusive mechanisms that could lead to more confrontation in the region. Australian National University Emeritus Professor Hugh White is of such opinion and believes that AUKUS is dangerous in provoking rather than deterring aggressive China.[40]

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[36] Aries A. Arugay, "It's Way Too Complicated! Trump 2.0 and Southeast Asia," *Asian Politics & Policy* 17, no. 2 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.70020.

[37] Ren Yuanzhe, "Competitive Regional Security Architecture and the Value of ASEM," in *The Asia-Europe Meeting 2020 (ASEM)*, https://www.kas.de/documents/264850/7057229/Article+10+Competitive+Regional+Security.pdf/3b421ed0-e9e5-0a83-63b5-57e11460f511?version=1.0&t=1568275707566.

[38] Vina Nadjibulla, "Trump and the Asia Pacific: Five Key Questions in 2025," *Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada*, January 16, 2025, https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/trump-and-asia-pacific-five-key-questions-shaping-2025.

[39] Sarah Teo, "The Rise and Endurance of Minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific," *Lowy Institute*, December 27, 2024, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/rise-endurance-minilaterals-indo-pacific.

[40] 1News Reporters, "AUKUS: Possible NZ Entry Would Provoke More than Deter—Academic," *1News*, August 4, 2024, https://www.1news.co.nz/2024/08/04/aukus-possible-nz-entry-would-provoke-more-than-protect-academic/.

For others, minilateralism is providing a flexible, efficient, and focused approach to addressing global and regional issues. It enables countries to form strategic alliances based on common interests, facilitating more effective and timely responses to emerging challenges.[41]

Patrick Cronin from Heritage Foundation believes that ASEAN, the QUAD, and AUKUS are the pillars on which Indo-Pacific security will rest in the coming decades. ASEAN serves as a norm-builder, the QUAD functions as a problem-solver, and AUKUS acts as a deterrent to military conflict. ASEAN's annual meetings of leaders, foreign ministers, and defense chiefs are a foundation of inclusive diplomacy and cooperation. The informal QUAD dialogue among the United States, Japan, India, and Australia would promote a broader rules-based order, while the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) pact promises leading-edge defensive technology necessary to maintain a military balance of power.[42]

Some commentators believe that, given the decline of multilateralism, minilateralism could become a useful mechanism for smaller states to exert greater influence on specific issues, which might be diluted in larger multilateral settings dominated by great powers. [43] Nevertheless, it is clear that the actions taken to undermine free trade, America's alliances, and rule- and norm-based diplomacy will harm small states on the whole. While a genuine disaster is unlikely in the short term, there is a heightened tail risk that irreparable harm may be done to the liberal international order. For large states in the international system, the effects of a Trump presidency are far more uncertain. Large states are simply not as reliant on trade, alliances, and the functioning of international organizations for their security and prosperity.

Dilemmas for Small States

Politicians and experts in small states have already started discussing optimal responses to the transactional foreign policy pursued by the United States and several other major powers.

An interesting conversation between three Georgia experts demonstrates the range of options for small states like Georgia. According to David Aprasidze, Georgia cannot afford to pursue a transactional foreign policy. Although such a policy may appear practical in a swiftly shifting environment, for a small nation,

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[41] Swathi Satish, "Minilateralism: The New Trend in Diplomacy," *ClearIAS*, May 28, 2024, https://www.clearias.com/minilateralism/

[42] Patrick M. Cronin, "The 3 Pillars of Asia's New Security Architecture," *Hudson Institute*, October 2, 2021, https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/the-3-pillars-of-asia-s-new-security-architecture.

[43] Swathi Satish, "Minilateralism: The New Trend in Diplomacy," *ClearIAS*, May 28, 2024, https://www.clearias.com/minilateralism/

lacking a dependable ally, it can turn into a trap that eventually infringes on its sovereignty. A big, aggressive state could either turn such a country into its satellite or directly subordinate it. Nick MacFarlane, on the other hand, argues that if Georgia tilts too close to Russia in order to prevent serious regional disruption, it risks alienating the West. If it tilts too close to the West, it risks alienation of Russia and consequent economic and security disruption. Nick Macfarlain believes that, on balance, Georgia's foreign policy should lean towards the transactional without forgetting the values. Stephen Jones offers a flexible multi-vector foreign policy option focusing on minilateral partnership with Ukraine and Moldova as part of the pro-European "package of three. [44] This debate focusing on Georgia is relevant for many geopolitically challenged small nations.

The current Armenian leadership seems to be pursuing a balanced and pragmatic foreign policy with values-based aspirations. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan recently stated that Armenia is not formulating and implementing its foreign policy in one direction but is trying to find and build the right balances. "We want, and this is logical, to have good relations with all international partners. Moreover, we want to regulate relations with our regional countries - Azerbaijan, Turkey, we want to improve relations with other neighbors - Georgia, Iran. And, of course, we want to deepen relations with the European Union. ...There may be situations when there will be certain tensions and intersections between the different directions of our foreign policy. We see the resolution of this situation in our transparency, sincerity, and openness towards all our partners, so that there are no dark corners in the policies we pursue, as well as in their causes and justifications," declares Nikol Pashinyan.[45]

Singapore, one of the most successful and pragmatic small states, follows five core principles in its navigation through current international uncertainties. First, have a strong economy, a stable political system, and a united society. Second, build credible armed forces to defend the country and ensure that the nation is not bullied by an external adversary. Third, develop a wide network of relations based on mutual respect. Be a friend to all and an enemy of no one. Avoid siding with one side over the other. Four, promote a global order based on the rule of law and

[44] Expert Comment, "Can Georgia Afford Transactional Foreign Policy?" *Georgian Institute of Politics*, no. 23 (March 2023), https://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/GIP-Expert-comment-23-EN.pdf.

[45] "Armenia Does Not Intend to Aggravate Relations with Russia – Pashinyan," *Arka.am*, 2025, https://arka.am/en/news/politics/armenia-does-not-intend-to-aggravate-relations-with-russia-pashinyan/.

international norms. Lastly, Singapore must also be a "credible and consistent" partner.[46]

New Zealand very much shares and follows these principles. However, declaring and implementing the principles is not the same thing. The New Zealand government has been carefully assessing the current strategic situation and considering various responses. It has already toned down some of its values-based approaches. New Zealand has been largely mute while President Trump decided to quit the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Accord, attacked foreign assistance programs, and withdrew funding from key United Nations organizations. When the Trump administration imposed sanctions on the International Criminal Court, New Zealand, along with Australia and Japan, failed to join a statement from 79 other countries expressing unwavering support for the court.[47]

New Zealand has to navigate increased polarization in its Asia-Pacific neighborhood and avoid being drawn into what is expected to be a more intense US-China rivalry while continuing its commitment to support a liberal-rules-based international system. New Zealand has been able to maintain close economic engagement and security cooperation with the United States and Australia, and at the same time forge strong economic connections with China. Whether this balance can or should be maintained is up for debate.[48]

Some New Zealand experts believe that the country should reduce reliance on China and strengthen ties with the United States while striking a balance between principle and pragmatism.[49]

Other commentators are more concerned about the foreign policy dichotomy between New Zealand's traditional strategic partners—the US and Europe—and urge the New Zealand government to follow the principled European approach to international affairs, which they believe is closer to New Zealand's worldview than the one currently articulated by the Trump administration.[50]

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[46] Danson Cheong, "As a Small Country, Singapore Has to Be Friends with Everyone, but at Times It Needs to Advance Its Own Interests," *The Straits Times*, July 17, 2017, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/as-a-small-country-singapore-has-to-be-friends-with-everyone-but-at-times-it-needs-to.

[47] Alexander Gillespie, "Trump's Dismantling of International Order Has Left NZ Mute—Why?" *1News*, February 14, 2025, https://www.1news.co.nz/2025/02/15/trumps-dismantling-of-international-order-has-left-nz-mute-why/.

[48] Guy C. Charlton and Xiang Gao, "Sailing Chaotic Seas: New Zealand's Foreign Policy in 2025," *The Diplomat*, January 7, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/01/sailing-chaotic-seas-new-zealands-foreign-policy-in-2025.

[49] Sanjay Karthikeyan, "New Zealand and the Quest for a Coherent Foreign Policy," *YIP Institute*, September 29, 2024, https://yipinstitute.org/policy/new-zealand-and-the-quest-for-a-coherent-foreign-policy.

[50] Alexander Gillespie and Robert Patman, "America or Europe? Why Trump's Ukraine U-Turn Is a Fork in the Road for New Zealand," *The Spinoff*, March 5, 2025, https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/06-03-2025/america-or-europe-why-trumps-ukraine-u-turn-is-a-fork-in-the-road-for-new-zealand.

In the meantime, former deputy chief of staff under the first Trump administration, a New Zealand born, Chris Liddell advises New Zealand leadership to "stay diplomatically cautious during the current geopolitical shifts, and avoid unnecessary confrontation; focus on long-term strategic positioning rather than reacting to short-term political turbulence; leverage the country's strengths as a small, stable nation with strong rule of law and minimal corruption; prioritize relationships within the Five Eyes alliance; position the country as an attractive investment destination with unique opportunities in digital and natural infrastructure; and remain pragmatically optimistic about global challenges, seeing them as potential opportunities. Liddell believes that "we are now entering a world of challenges, but at the same time a world of unlimited opportunity. It's also a world where a small nation can outperform." To do that, New Zealand, according to Liddell, should overcome complacency, increase national aspiration levels, embrace transformational solutions, develop more flexible and effective institutions, and compete globally, not just locally.[51]

Conclusion

Our analysis has demonstrated the interdependence between domestic and international political politicization and its impact on the global and regional orders. While nationalist foreign policies lead to more geopolitical competition, they are at the same time adding urgency to adjusting the international and regional mechanisms and developing new forms of cooperation.

With the rise of bilateralism and the decline of multilateralism, minilateralism is starting to play an increasingly prominent role. Such structures could become more responsive and effective in dealing with emerging security challenges as long as they focus on engagement and not confrontation.

Transactional foreign policies resent value-based partnerships. At the same time, they inject necessary pragmatism in dealing with the very diverse community of nations, where narrow ideological commitments can further fragment the international society and limit collaboration in addressing existential challenges like climate change.

One could relate to Distinguished Professor of International Relations at American University Amitav Acharya's point that a world order, where non-Western nations have a greater voice, will create a more equitable and mutually

[51] Fran O'Sullivan, "Ex-Trump Adviser Chris Liddell Tells NZ Stay Cautious, Seize Opportunities in Global Shifts," *NZ Herald*, March 14, 2025, https://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/economy/ex-trump-adviser-liddell-tells-nz-to-stay-cautious-seize-opportunities-in-global-shifts-fran-osullivan/CJI5DXNI4JEGTME7IQ6TJP4OC4/.

respectful global arrangement. Acharya urges "the West" to embrace the inevitable and work with "the Rest". Burying the "West-versus-the Rest" mindset is a central challenge for our age," states Acharya.[52] One of the important consequences of global strategic shifts and transformational politics is the need to reassess traditional international relations' theories, concepts, and frameworks to ensure that our understanding and interpretation of ongoing trends is less factional and more nuanced. This could become a great opportunity for academic communities in smaller nations as part of enhancing their countries' international voice and diplomatic capabilities.

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 RENEWED IMPETUS TO THE EUROPEAN UNION ENLARGEMENT: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CLOSER TIES BETWEEN THE EU AND ARMENIA

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Abstract

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has triggered a renewed impetus for the EU's Enlargement Policy, which has acquired geopolitical significance with the unprecedented inclusion of three Eastern partners under this framework, together with the revitalization of negotiations with the Western Balkans. Following Aldecoa's understanding of enlargement as a process that implies a restructuring of the EU's political system, there is also a need to address internal reforms to accommodate this new wave of accession. The consideration of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine as candidate countries has changed the *raison d'être* of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). Originally conceived for states without clear prospects of EU integration, the ENP's purpose has shifted, effectively opening the door for further integration of other Eastern Partnership countries into the European Union. In this context, Armenia is enhancing its relations with the EU, seeking closer integration, and even sparking debates in the country about formally requesting membership. Major challenges ahead may include the need to consolidate democracy, reverse its economic and military integration with Russia, and reach a peace agreement with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Keywords: *European Union, enlargement, Armenia, European Neighborhood Policy, Eastern Partnership.*

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Introduction

Russia's aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has fostered a shared recognition within the European Union (EU) of the strategic importance of its Enlargement Policy, which is now frequently described as a "geopolitical investment".[1] An envisaged "Europe of the 36"[2] would include six countries in the Western Balkans – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, which already had membership prospects before 2022. Together with these, three countries from the Eastern Partnership (EaP) framework – Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have recently obtained candidate status. Before the onset of the war, these countries lacked clear prospects for accession. This was partly a consequence of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) being incorporated under the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), which, at its inception, was intended to offer neighboring partners "all but institutions",[3] thereby effectively excluding them from the EU's Enlargement Policy. As a result, these three countries did not fall under this framework until 2022, even though the Association Agreements and DCFTAs (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas) they signed with the EU between 2013 and 2014 recognized their European aspirations.

Against this backdrop, a sort of enlargement awakening is taking place in the EU, accelerating negotiations with candidate countries that were previously stalled. It is noteworthy that this marks the longest period since 1973 in which the EU has not admitted new members. More than twelve years have passed since Croatia joined the EU in 2013, and, even under the most optimistic scenarios, the next enlargement is not expected to take place until at least 2030.[4] This renewed impetus has considerably impacted the dynamics in the Eastern neighborhood, where the three partners not covered under the enlargement umbrella – Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan – are adopting very different courses of action. While Lukashenko's regime in Belarus remains as distant as possible from European integration due to its complicity with the Russian actions in Ukraine, Aliyev's government in Azerbaijan has shown very little interest in integration, if any at all. In contrast, Armenia is strengthening its ties with the EU, particularly since Baku's offensive over

[1] European Commission, *2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy* (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, November 8 2023).
[2] Sandor Zsiros, "Scholz cree que la UE deberá reformarse para dar cabida a nuevos países," *Euronews*, August 29 2022, https://es.euronews.com/busi-ness/2022/08/29/scholz-cree-que-la-ue-debera-reformarse-para-dar-cabida-a-nuevos-paises.
[3] European Commission, *A Wider Europe — A Proximity Policy as the Key to Stability: Peace, Security and Stability, International Dialogue and the Role of the EU* (December 6 2002).
[4] Lili Bayer, "Charles Michel: Get Ready by 2030 to Enlarge EU," *Politico*, August 28 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/european-council-president-charles-michel-eu-enlargement-by-2030/.

Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, even initiating debates within the country about formally applying for membership.

In light of these developments, this article seeks to examine the significance of the European Union's upcoming enlargement—described as a geopolitical investment—in the context of Europe's response to the war between Russia and Ukraine. Moreover, it analyses the impact of the renewed momentum for enlargement in EU-Armenia relations, addressing the opportunity for closer integration despite major challenges ahead. These considerations may include consolidating democratic reforms, diversifying economic and military relationships to mitigate dependence on Russia, and attaining a peace agreement with Azerbaijan.

The Significance of the EU Enlargement: Beyond the Mere Arithmetic Addition of Member States

For this article's analysis, we adopt an academic perspective that goes beyond the understanding of the enlargement as a mere arithmetic addition of Member States to the EU. Instead, Francisco Aldecoa discusses how the accession of new countries entails a significant transformative process, both internally, as the EU prepares and adapts itself for a larger Union, and externally, as candidate countries are required to undertake reforms and absorb the EU's *acquis communautaire*. Therefore, it continues a "process that implies a restructuring of the political system of European construction as a consequence of the incorporation of new Member States".[5] From this perspective, enlargement can be understood within the context of the European Union's ongoing dilemma between deepening integration and expanding membership. In other words, for enlargement to be successful and not to pose risks to the functioning of the institutions, prior internal reform is necessary.

Following this logic, Aldecoa identifies four distinct waves of enlargement in the history of the EU. The first wave, in 1973, brought Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom into the European Community. At that time, enlargement slowed the process of deeper integration, strengthening the intergovernmental voices to the detriment of federalists.

The second wave then occurred in two phases: first with the accession of Greece in 1981, followed by Portugal and Spain in 1986. In contrast to the first, this round of enlargement accelerated the integration, ultimately resulting in the Treaty of Maastricht, which transformed the European Economic Community into a more politically unified European Union.

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[5] Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga and Eduardo García Cancela, *La Unión Europea: De la Idea Utópica de Europa a la Unión Europea como Potencia Mundial* (Shackleton Books, 2023).

The third wave took place in 1995 with the accession of Austria, Finland, and Sweden—countries Aldecoa refers to as "net contributors," given that they were not primary recipients of EU cohesion funds. Their entry helped pave the way for the next round of enlargements.

The fourth wave, driven by the objective of peacefully unifying Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain, encompassed the enlargements of 2004 (Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia), 2007 (Bulgaria and Romania), and 2013 (Croatia).

Moreover, on February 1, 2020, the United Kingdom withdrew from the EU, following the mandate of the Brexit referendum in June 2016. This reduced the number of Member States from 28 to 27. Coincidentally, over the last five years, the Union has faced major challenges that have enhanced its federal dimension. Notable examples include the joint purchase of vaccines or the issuance of common debt to finance the COVID-19 recovery plans and the Next Generation Fund. The EU's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has also involved unprecedented developments in its foreign, security, and defense policies.[6] Without the United Kingdom, the European institutions and Member States have shown an unexpected cohesion and capacity to act.

However, these *de facto* federal advances have not been consolidated *de jure* through a reform of the Treaties.[7] Consequently, alongside the current renewed impetus for enlargement, there is also a pressing need for further deepening of the Union. In this regard, the primary obstacle to the accession of new Members is the requirement for unanimity in the European Council's decision-making, which limits the EU's capacity to act decisively on the global stage. In other words, the addition of more voices to the table could lead to persistent obstruction of the institutions. Since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, the Union's Treaties have not been amended. The European Parliament has called for a Convention to reform the Treaties three times since 2020, most recently in November 2023,[8] but it is still awaiting a decision by the Council.

Legally, the Enlargement Policy is regulated by Article 49 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU), which establishes the conditions for a country to join the EU. It begins as follows: "Any European State which respects the values referred

[6] Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga and Luis Norberto González Alonso, eds., *La Unión Europea frente a la Agresión a Ucrania* (Editorial Catarata, 2022).
[7] Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga and Eduardo García Cancela, eds., *Las Claves de la Profundización y Ampliación de la Unión Europea tras la Agresión a Ucrania* (Editorial Catarata, 2024).
[8] European Parliament, *European Parliament Resolution of 22 November 2023 on Proposals of the European Parliament for the Amendment of the Treaties* (November 22 2023), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0427_EN.html.

to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union". According to this formulation, it establishes at least two clear conditions for countries aspiring to membership. On the one hand, there is a geographical factor, as it implies that only "European" states can apply, though this continues to prompt debate over the precise boundaries of the continent.

Secondly, there is a normative dimension, requiring applicant countries to share the common values that underpin the EU, within their domestic policies and in their external relations (i.e. respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities). Additionally, the Copenhagen Criteria, established by the European Council during its June 1993 meeting in Copenhagen, highlight the fundamental economic, political, and social reforms required of candidate states before accession.[9]

In this sense, enlargement should not be viewed solely as a process in which the candidate countries implement the necessary reforms to meet the conditions and requirements for accession stipulated by the EU. It also requires the Union to prepare itself to accommodate these new members and to avoid political and institutional paralysis. Therefore, to ensure the success of future enlargements, prior reform of the Treaties is necessary. In fact, the Strategic Agenda elaborated by the European Council in July 2024, which sets EU's political orientations for the next five years, identifies "preparing for a bigger and stronger Union" as one of its main priorities, calling for "a merit-based EU enlargement process with incentives, to run in parallel with necessary internal reforms".[10] Also in July 2024, Ursula Von der Leyen delivered the Political Guidelines for the next European Commission, which included the commitment to enlargement, but did not mention a plan to amend the Treaties.[11] Hence, the key for the EU in this new term (2024-2029) is to find a way to make both the deepening of integration and the enlargement possible.

The Fifth Wave of Enlargement: A Geopolitical Investment

According to Aldecoa's classification, the current renewed impetus would fit as the fifth wave of enlargement. As stated in the introduction and discussed further below, the primary factor driving the acceleration of decisions on this issue is the European response to the war between Russia and Ukraine. Although Russia's actions

[9] EUR-Lex, "Accession Criteria (Copenhagen Criteria)," accessed May 20 2025, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/accession-criteria-copenhagen-criteria.html.

[10] European Council, *Strategic Agenda 2024–2029* (July 2024), https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/yxrc05pz/sn02167en24_web.pdf.

[11] European Commission, *Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission* (July 2024), https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en.

are directed against a third state, they have nonetheless posed a threat to the EU. On February 24, 2022, the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, stated, "It is not our war, but it is our security, that is why we must support Ukraine with all the means at our disposal".[12] In another interview in October 2023, Borrell further asserted that "the EU is risking its survival".[13] In this context, the Russian invasion in Ukraine have been interpreted as an attack on the European model of society—a model the EU seeks to promote internationally and which is grounded in a system of norms and values, such as democracy and the protection of human rights,[14] as enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU).

In the face of this situation, and despite significant limitations in competences and decision-making mechanisms in foreign, security, and defense policy, the EU has managed to deliver a rapid and effective response through its three main institutions.[15] Moreover, this response has been continuously renewed, reflecting a significant degree of cohesion between the institutions and the Member States, even if, at times, it has been necessary to employ creative formulas to circumvent vetoes from countries such as Hungary.[16] On May 20, 2025, the Council adopted the 17th package of sanctions against Russia.[17] At the same time, unprecedented assistance has been provided to Ukraine, amounting to almost 147.9 billion euros, including 77 billion euros in financial, economic, and humanitarian aid, 50.3 billion euros in military assistance, mainly through the European Peace Facility instrument, and 17

[12] "Borrell: Estamos ante una guerra de verdad a las puertas de Europa y no sabemos hasta dónde va a llegar," *RTVE.es*, February 24 2022, https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20220224/borrell-alerta-guerra-ucrania-afecta-seguridad-ue/2296321.shtml.

[13] María R. Sahuquillo, "Borrell advierte de que la UE se juega su supervivencia en la guerra de Rusia contra Ucrania," *El País*, October 2 2023, https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-10-02/borrell-advierte-de-que-la-ue-se-juega-su-supervivencia-en-la-guerra-de-rusia-contra-ucrania.html.

[14] Mariola Urrea Corres, "La Agresión Rusa a Ucrania como Amenaza al Orden Liberal: La Respuesta Firme de una Europa Unida," in Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga, coord., *La Agresión Rusa a Ucrania y sus Consecuencias para el Relanzamiento de la Unión Europea* (Servicio Editorial de la Universidad del País Vasco, 2023).

[15] Mercedes Guinea Llorente, "La Invasión de Ucrania: Un Revulsivo que Sacuda los Cimientos de la Unión Europea," in Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga and Luis Norberto González Alonso, eds., *La Unión Europea frente a la Agresión a Ucrania* (Editorial Catarata, 2022).

[16] Beatriz Navarro, "Los Líderes Europeos Sortean el Veto Húngaro y Abren Negociaciones con Ucrania y Moldavia," *La Vanguardia*, December 14 2023, https://www.lavanguardia.com/-internacional/20231214/9450961/lideres-ue-deciden-abrir-negociaciones-ingreso-ucrania-moldavia.html.

[17] Council of the EU, "Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine: EU Agrees 17th Package of Sanctions," press release, May 20 2025, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/05/20/russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-eu-agrees-17th-package-of-sanctions/.

billion euros in support for Ukrainian refugees in Europe.[18] It is also noteworthy that, as of November 15, 2022, the EU launched the Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM Ukraine), through which the Ukrainian army is receiving military training on European soil.[19]

In this context, since 2022, the geopolitical dimension of the Enlargement Policy has been emphasized in various official documents and statements. For instance, the 2023 Communication of the European Commission on enlargement identified the accession of new Members as "a geostrategic investment", highlighting a stronger focus on the alignment of the candidate countries with the EU's foreign, security, and defense policy. In short, the text presented enlargement as inevitable, an unavoidable necessity and responsibility, and directly linked to the response against the Russian invasion in Ukraine.[20]

One year after the start of the new legislature in the EU, following the elections to the European Parliament in June 2024, the association of enlargement with strengthening the Union's geopolitical influence has only increased. The previously referred Strategic Agenda of the European Council stresses, "the new geopolitical reality underscores the importance of enlargement as a geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity".[21] On the other hand, the Political Guidelines for the European Commission define enlargement as a "geopolitical imperative". In that document, Von der Leyen argued that an enlarged Union "helps reduce our dependencies, enhances our resilience and strengthens our competitiveness […] and can help anchor democracy, stability and the rule of law across Europe."[22]

Moreover, the 2024 European Commission's Communication on the Enlargement Policy (published on October 30, 2024) has maintained this core argument: "the three membership applications from the EU's eastern neighbors in the wake of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022, and the ensuing decisions by the European Council, are further testimony of the geopolitical weight of EU enlargement".[23] More recently, on May 9, 2025, the joint statement by the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, the President of the European Council, An-

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[18] European Council, "Russia's War against Ukraine," accessed May 22 2025, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/topics/russia-s-war-against-ukraine/.
[19] "Ayuda a Ucrania: Formación de Militares Ucranianos," *Revista Española de Defensa*, December 2022, 16–19, https://www.defensa.gob.es/Galerias/gabinete/red/2022/12/p-16-19-red-400-ayuda.pdf.
[20] European Commission, *2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*.
[21] European Council, *Strategic Agenda 2024-2029.*
[22] European Commission, *Political guidelines for the next European Commission.*
[23] European Commission, *2024 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy* (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, October 30 2024), https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/-download/7c67aed6-e7c2-47de-b3f8-b3edd26a3e26_en.

tonio Costa, and the President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, on the 75th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration once again characterized enlargement as a "geopolitical investment".[24] Consequently, the heightened sense of vulnerability created by the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has profoundly influenced the direction of the EU's Enlargement Policy, accelerating its progress and positioning the prospect of a fifth wave of enlargement as a strategic priority that reinforces the Union's geopolitical influence.

The EU's Enlargement Awakening Following Russia's Aggression against Ukraine

On February 28, 2022, four days after the beginning of Russia's aggression, Ukraine formally applied for EU membership, a decision also taken by Moldova and Georgia on March 3. In less than four months, the European Council, at its meeting on June 23 and 24, 2022, recognized these three states as subjects of the Enlargement Policy, following a favorable recommendation from the European Commission.[25] As a result, the Council granted Ukraine and Moldova official candidate status and designated Georgia as a potential candidate. A year and a half later, at its meeting on December 14, 2023, the European Council reaffirmed this decision by opening accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and granting Georgia candidate status.

These decisions are particularly noteworthy given the speed with which they were made, especially in comparison to the slower dynamics that characterized the Enlargement Policy before the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. For instance, Montenegro and Serbia, the only two candidates, except for Turkey, that had managed to start negotiations before February 2022, took much longer. Montenegro applied for membership in December 2008, obtained candidate status in December 2010, and began accession negotiations in June 2012.[26] Similarly, Serbia made the formal application in December 2009 and was recognized as a candidate in March 2012, and had to wait until January 2014 for the negotiations to commence.[27]

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[24] European Parliament, European Commission, and European Council, *Joint Statement on the 75th Anniversary of the Schuman Declaration* (May 9 2025), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20250508IPR28309/joint-statement-on-the-75th-anniversary-of-the-schuman-declaration.
[25] European Council, *European Council, 23–24 June 2022*, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2022/06/23-24/.
[26] European Council, "EU Enlargement Policy: Montenegro," https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/policies/enlargement/montenegro/.
[27] European Council, "EU Enlargement Policy: Serbia," https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/policies/enlargement/serbia/.

For these reasons, the Western Balkan countries initially viewed these developments with skepticism and called for a stronger commitment from the EU regarding their integration aspirations.[28] However, since July 2022, the acceleration of accession negotiations has also extended to this region. At that time, the Council agreed to open the first negotiation chapters with Albania and North Macedonia.[29] Subsequently, Bosnia and Herzegovina obtained candidate status (December 2022)[30], and Kosovo achieved a visa liberalization regime in April 2023, which entered into force on January 1, 2024,[31] among other developments. As of May 2025, the new Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos,[32] and the President of the European Council, Antonio Costa,[33] have suggested that Albania and Montenegro could be the first two countries to join the EU by 2030.

On the other hand, the inclusion of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in the Enlargement Policy has changed the *raison d'être* of the ENP,[34] a framework of which these three countries are part, together with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus, in its Eastern dimension, the EaP. Originally, the ENP was designed to establish relationships with the neighboring countries that would offer "all but institutions", as stated by then Commission President Romano Prodi in 2002.[35] In other words, their membership in the EU was not contemplated. In other words, in the Association Agreements signed with these countries in 2013 (Georgia and Moldova) and 2014 (Ukraine), the EU limited itself to acknowledging their "European aspirations and European choice" in the preamble, an approach that fell short of recognizing them as future potential candidates for membership. Nevertheless, two decades after the launch of the ENP, the Council decisions of June 2022 and December 2023 have

[28] "Balkan Countries Warn That EU Loses Credibility in Accession Process," *Euractiv*, June 23 2022, https://euroefe.euractiv.es/section/ampliacion/news/paises-balcanicos-avisan-ue-pierde-credibilidad-proceso-adhesion/.

[29] Dani Rovirosa and Laura Zornoza, "EU Opens Accession Negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia," *Euractiv*, July 19 2022, https://euroefe.euractiv.es/section/ampliacion/news/la-ue-abre-las-negociaciones-de-adhesion-de-albania-y-macedonia-del-norte/.

[30] European Council, "EU Enlargement Policy: Bosnia and Herzegovina," https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/policies/enlargement/bosnia-herzegovina/.

[31] European Commission, "Visa-Free Travel for Kosovo Citizens to the EU," January 3 2024, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/visa-free-travel-kosovo-citizens-eu-2024-01-03_en.

[32] Swissinfo, "Comisaria de Ampliación Ve 'Muy Realista' Nuevas Adhesiones a la UE en 2030," *Swissinfo*, May 13 2025, https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/comisaria-de-ampliaci%C3%B3n-ve-%22muy-realista%22-nuevas-adhesiones-a-la-ue-en-2030/89312809.

[33] "Albania y Montenegro Podrían Entrar en la UE Antes que los Demás, Dice Costa a 'Euronews'," *Euronews*, May 12 2025, https://es.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/05/12/antonio-costa-impulsa-la-adhesion-a-la-ue-de-los-balcanes-con-una-gira-por-seis-paises.

[34] Eduardo García Cancela, "¿Todo y También las Instituciones? La Vecindad Oriental de la UE tras la CoFoE y la Agresión Rusa a Ucrania," in Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga and Mercedes Guinea Llorente, eds., *Una Unión Europea Necesitada de Reforma: Hacia la Tercera Convención Europea* (Catarata, 2022).

[35] European Commission, *A Wider Europe — A Proximity Policy as the Key to Stability*.

fundamentally altered its character, effectively opening the door of the EU to all three of its Eastern neighbors.

Although the Commission's communications on the Enlargement Policy cover ten countries, a "Europe of 36" implies an addition of nine new Members to the current 27. Therefore, the fifth wave of enlargement is directed at six countries in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia), and three Eastern partners (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). This would exclude Turkey, which has been a candidate for membership since 2005, but with whom the EU has frozen accession negotiations since 2018.[36] Of these nine countries, eight already have official candidate status—all except Kosovo, informally considered a potential candidate.

However, at its meeting on June 27, 2024, the European Council decided to effectively halt Georgia's accession process following the adoption of the so-called "foreign agents' law", which runs counter to the EU values.[37] As a result of democratic backsliding, Georgia now risks facing the same stalled prospects as Turkey. In July 2024, the EU suspended financial aid to Georgia[38], and in November, the Georgian government cancelled enlargement discussions with Brussels until the end of 2028.[39] Furthermore, leaders such as Poland's Prime Minister Donald Tusk are advocating in the European Council for the revocation of the EU's visa-free regime with Georgia.[40]

Given the heterogeneity among candidate countries and their varying degrees of harmonization with the *acquis communautaire*, the fifth wave of enlargement could take place in several phases, as was the case in the 1980s with the accession of Greece, Portugal, and Spain, or with the successive rounds of enlargements in the early twenty-first century.[41] Consequently, some candidates still have a considerable path ahead before accession.

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[36] European Commission, *2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*.
[37] European Council, "EU Enlargement Policy: Georgia," https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/georgia/.
[38] "Georgia Accession Process De Facto Halted as EU Calls on Government to Change Course," *EU Neighbours East*, October 30 2024, https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/georgia-accession-process-de-facto-halted-as-eu-calls-on-government-to-change-course/.
[39] Lucy Davalou and Andrew Naughtie, "Georgian Prime Minister Suspends EU Membership Talks until End of 2028," *Euronews*, November 28 2024, https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/11/28/georgian-prime-minister-suspends-eu-membership-talks-until-end-of-2028.
[40] Robin Fabbro and Dominik K. Cagara, "Poland's Tusk Is 'Building Majority in EU' to Revoke Georgia Visa-Free Access," *OC Media*, June 11 2025, https://oc-media.org/polands-tusk-is-building-majority-in-eu-to-revoke-georgia-visa-free-access/.
[41] Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga, "La Ampliación de la Unión Europea en el Debate Permanente con la Profundización," *Grand Place* 21 (2024).

With this in mind, and to promote common political objectives before enlargement—as well as to coordinate positions on issues such as security, defense, and support for Ukraine—the European Political Community (EPC) was launched in October 2022. This new forum brings together all European Heads of State and Government (47 in total), except Russia, Belarus, and the Holy See.[42] Two out of the six summits held so far have taken place in candidate countries: Chisinau (June 2023) and Tirana (May 2025).[43][44] In addition, Armenia and Azerbaijan are expected to host EPC's summits in 2026 and 2028, respectively. The EPC provides further avenues for bilateral and multilateral engagement among the EU, enlargement candidates, and neighboring countries, which is essential given the renewed momentum for enlargement.[45]

The Renewed Momentum for Enlargement: An Opportunity to Enhance EU-Armenia Relations

In parallel with the renewed momentum gained by the EU's Enlargement Policy, relations between Yerevan and Brussels have experienced increased ambition, including debates in Armenia about formally applying for EU membership. As previously mentioned, the participation of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in the enlargement framework since 2022 has considerably impacted the dynamics in the Eastern neighborhood.[46] In the case of Armenia, since the inception of the EaP in 2009, the country has aspired to be part of the group of neighbors with deeper European integration.[47] In 2013, Armenia concluded negotiations with the EU on an Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area

[42] Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga, "Nace una Nueva Organización Confederal: La Comunidad Política Europea," *InfoLibre*, October 9 2022, https://www.infolibre.es/opinion/plaza-publica/nace-nueva-organizacion-confederal-comunidad-politica-europea_129_1334876.html.

[43] In the last summit of the European Political Community in Tirana (Albania), in May 2025, there were 47 participant states: the 27 EU Members, the 10 countries under EU's Enlargement Policy, and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and four microstates (Andorra, Liechtenstein, Monaco and San Marino).

[44] "European Political Community Summit in Tirana: Europe Is Awake and Ready to Preserve Peace," *European Western Balkans*, May 17 2025, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/05/17/european-political-community-summit-in-tirana-europe-is-awake-and-ready-to-preserve-peace/.

[45] Alexander Pracht, "Yerevan to Host European Political Community Summit in 2026," *CivilNet*, May 24 2025, https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/952633/yerevan-to-host-european-political-community-summit-in-2026/.

[46] Tamara Gagua, "La Agresión Rusa a Ucrania y sus Consecuencias en el Vecindario Este," in Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga, *La Agresión Rusa a Ucrania y sus Consecuencias para el Relanzamiento de la Unión Europea* (Servicio Editorial de la Universidad del País Vasco, 2023).

[47] Kristi Raik, "A Rocky Road towards Europe: The Prospects for the EU's Eastern Partnership Association Agreements," Finnish Institute of International Affairs, no. 110 (2012), https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/bp110.pdf.

(AA/DCFTA). However, this agreement was ultimately set aside following President Serzh Sargsyan's visit to Moscow, where he announced Armenia's decision to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).[48]

Despite this setback, the scenario has changed considerably since 2013. First, in 2017, the EU and Armenia managed to sign an *ad hoc* agreement, the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which preserved nearly all elements of the AA, although leaving out the DCFTA.[49] In this way, an EU-Armenia cooperation framework was secured, which, although more limited, allows for some convergence and respects Armenia's commitments to the EAEU.[50] Nevertheless, unlike the AAs signed with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, the CEPA does not acknowledge Armenia's European aspirations. On the other hand, the Velvet Revolution of April 2018—an unprecedented, peaceful social movement largely directed against political corruption—led to the resignation of President Sargsyan.[51] Nikol Pashinyan, the leader of the protests, was elected Prime Minister, initiating a democratic transformation of the country grounded in the reforms outlined in the CEPA.[52]

However, a turning point in relations between the EU and Armenia came with the change in the *status quo* in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as a result of the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh, and especially after Azerbaijan's offensive in September 2023.[53] One of the most remarkable developments was the launching of the EU's civilian mission to patrol Armenia's side of the border with Azerbaijan, the EUMA, in February 2023.[54] Since then, Armenia has begun to gradually distance

[48] Ter-Matevosyan, Vahram, Anna Drnoian, Narek Mkrtchyan, and Tigran Yepremyan. 2017. "Armenia in the Eurasian Economic Union: Reasons for Joining and Its Consequences." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 58 (3): 340–60. https://doi:10.1080/15387216.2017.1360193.

[49] Hrant Kostanyan and Richard Giragosian, "EU-Armenian Relations: Charting a Fresh Course," Centre for European Policy Studies, November 14 2017.

[50] Maral Tavitian, "Armenia's Tricky EU-Russia Balancing Act," *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 5 2018, https://www.cfr.org/interview/armenias-tricky-eu-russia-balancing-act.

[51] Olesya Vartanyan, "Velvet Revolution Takes Armenia into the Unknown," *International Crisis Group*, 2018.

[52] Tobias Schumacher and Cengiz Günay, "Territorial Conflict, Domestic Crises, and the Covid-19 Pandemic in the South Caucasus: Explaining Variegated EU Responses," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 59 (2021): 137–149.

[53] Faustine Vincent, "After Russia's 'Betrayal,' Armenia Seeks New Allies to Ensure Its Security," *Le Monde*, November 27 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/11/27/after-russia-s-betrayal-armenia-seeks-new-allies-to-ensure-its-security_6291681_4.html.

[54] Sossi Tatikyan, "Why Is the EU Deploying a Mission in Armenia and What to Expect?" *EVN Report*, February 20 2023, https://evnreport.com/politics/why-is-the-eu-deploying-a-mission-in-armenia-and-what-to-expect/.

itself from Russia, considering that Moscow has failed to fulfil its security guarantees,[55] opening a window of opportunity for a closer association with the EU.

Further than that, on October 17, 2023, Pashinyan delivered a speech in the European Parliament in which he stated: "Armenia is ready to be closer to the European Union, as much as the European Union considers it possible".[56] In turn, the European institutions are welcoming this renewed momentum. In November 2023, a delegation from the European Commission and the European External Action Service conducted a "fact-finding mission" to examine in detail the areas where convergence between Armenia and the EU could be accelerated and deepened.[57] More importantly, the European Parliament passed a resolution on March 12, 2024, in support of Armenia's renewed European aspirations and called for its inclusion in the EU Enlargement Policy.[58]

In parallel, the pro-European civil society in Armenia launched a citizens' initiative to request a referendum about the country's accession to the EU.[59] The campaign obtained more than 60,000 signatures, which allowed for its debate on the National Assembly (Parliament) of Armenia.[60] Consequently, on March 26, 2025, the National Assembly passed a bill for "the initiation of the process of accession of Armenia to the EU".[61] Nevertheless, as of May 2025, the country has not yet formally applied for EU membership, mostly due to potential internal and geopolitical implications, although there are signs among the political elite showing that they are carefully considering it.[62]

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[55] Gabriel Gavin, "We Can't Rely on Russia to Protect Us Anymore, Armenian PM Says," *Politico*, September 13 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/we-cant-rely-russia-protect-us-anymore-nikol-pashinyan-armenia-pm/.

[56] Office of the Prime Minister of Armenia, "Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's Speech at the European Parliament," October 17 2023, https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2023/10/17/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/.

[57] European External Action Service, "EU Fact-Finding Mission to Armenia," November 24 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/armenia/eu-fact-finding-mission-armenia_en.

[58] European Parliament, Joint Motion for a Resolution on Closer Ties between the EU and Armenia and the Need for a Peace Agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, March 12 2024, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2024-0163_EN.html.

[59] Alexander Pracht, "What Motivates Armenians to Call for a Referendum on Joining the EU?" *CivilNet*, October 22 2024, https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/802079/what-motivates-armenians-to-call-for-a-referendum-on-joining-the-eu/.

[60] "Armenian EU Membership Referendum Backers Gather More Signatures than Required," *JAM News*, November 7 2024, https://jam-news.net/armenian-eu-membership-referendum-backers-gather-more-signatures-than-required/.

[61] European Parliament, Joint Statement on the Adoption by the National Assembly of Armenia of the Law on the Initiation of the Process of Accession of Armenia to the EU, March 26 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/es/product/product-details/20250326DPU39920.

[62] Gian Volpicelli, "Armenia Mulling EU Membership Application, Foreign Minister Says," *Politico*, March 9 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/armenia-mulling-eu-membership-application-foreign-minister-mirzoyan-says/.

Particularly, the success of the Georgian application for membership, with granted official candidate status since December 2023, has allowed Armenia to consider this possibility. Before 2022, it was unclear whether countries in the South Caucasus could achieve this milestone. The region, which borders Asia Minor, Central Asia, and the Middle East,[63] struggles to geographically comply with Article 49 of the TEU, which stipulates that any "European" state that embraces and "respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply for membership of the Union." While the geographical criterion of Article 49 was interpreted flexibly in previous cases, such as Cyprus, it remained ambiguous for the South Caucasus until Georgia's application was considered in 2022—a development that effectively opens the door for Armenia as well.

Beyond this, the possibility of including Armenia in the European Union's enlargement policy presents an opportunity for Brussels and underscores the geopolitical significance of the new wave of enlargement. On the one hand, it would consolidate its presence in the South Caucasus, which has grown over the last two years, particularly through the deployment of the EUMA, and which is gaining strategic importance amid setbacks in Georgia. At the same time, the EU has shown support for Pashinyan's Crossroads of Peace plan and has announced funding for key infrastructure projects such as the North-South corridor through its Global Gateway investment agenda.[64] This can be seen as an attempt to fill the vacuum and avoid other regional players from owning strategic roads, while enhancing Armenia's sovereignty. In addition, the EU is genuinely interested in improving the connectivity between Europe and Central Asia, for which the normalization of relations between Armenia and its neighbors (Azerbaijan and Turkey) can be a "game changer".[65] Within the enlargement framework, further investment in strategic infrastructure and an increased EU presence can be expected, along with the allocation of more European funds.

On the other hand, as highlighted by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, one of the objectives of EU enlargement is to "help anchor democracy, stability and the rule of law across Europe".[66] The inclusion of Armenia in the EU's Enlargement Policy would bring both greater scrutiny and support to the democratic reforms being implemented in the country. This would not only help consolidate the democratic transition and normative convergence but would also

[63] Thomas De Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2019).
[64] European Commission, *Joint Communication to … The Global Gateway* (JOIN(2021) 30 final) (December 1 2021), https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway_en.
[65] "Opening of Azeri, Turkish Borders with Armenia 'Game Changer' for EU," *Azatutyun*, April 4 2025, https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33373893.html.
[66] European Commission, *Political guidelines for the next European Commission.*

ensure that the investments already made by the EU in Armenia yield a positive and sustainable impact.

Armenia's Main Challenges on the Path Toward a Potential EU Membership Bid

Despite the renewed impetus for enhancing the EU-Armenia relations, there are various major challenges that Yerevan faces on its European path,[67] especially when analyzing a potential bid for membership. Among others, it is worth mentioning at least four that have become the most obvious. First, enlargement negotiations continue to be perceived in Brussels as merit-based processes. Therefore, democratic reforms need to be consolidated, fully implementing the CEPA provisions, and especially tackling disinformation and political polarization.

Secondly, Armenia must reverse its integration with Russia, withdrawing from the EAEU and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and terminating contracts allowing Russian troops to stay in Armenia. This cannot be accomplished overnight and presents significant economic and geopolitical challenges for Armenia, particularly as its economy becomes increasingly dependent on its Eurasian partners each year. In addition, the EU or its Member States would need to provide security guarantees to Yerevan—an issue that remains highly complex and has not yet been proposed by Brussels. In other words, seriously pursuing integration in the EU would put an end, or distort considerably, Armenia's traditional foreign policy doctrine of complementarity between Russia and the West[68], which requires serious efforts and careful consideration of its consequences.

Third, resolving all outstanding issues with Azerbaijan is essential. Yerevan's willingness to reach a peace agreement with Baku has been welcomed in Brussels.[69] However, since the announcement of the finalization of negotiations on March 13, 2025, the Aliyev regime has maintained a bellicose stance and introduced new conditions for Armenia. Of particular concern is the agreed withdrawal of foreign missions from the region, which directly affects the EUMA, as well as the demand for Armenia to withdraw its lawsuits against Azerbaijan at the Interna-

[67] "Armenia National Assembly Votes for Starting EU Accession Bid," *Le Monde*, March 26 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/europe/article/2025/03/26/armenia-national-assembly-votes-for-starting-eu-accession-bid_6739535_143.html.

[68] Narek Galstyan, "The Main Dimensions of Armenia's Foreign and Security Policy," Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, March 2023, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/162794/cd67865d0fcfef431b21f3e4bbe5e020.pdf.

[69] European External Action Service, "Armenia/Azerbaijan: Statement by the High Representative/Vice-President Regarding the Finalisation of Negotiations on Armenia/Azerbaijan Peace Treaty," March 14 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/armeniaazerbaijan-statement-high-representativevice-president-regarding-finalisation-negotiations_en.

tional Court of Justice.[70] These developments could hinder Armenia's closer relationship with the EU. At the most recent European Political Community summit in Tirana on May 16, 2025, Pashinyan and Aliyev held a brief meeting, in which they reaffirmed their commitment to sign the agreement.[71] However, despite the readiness shown by Armenia, the Azerbaijani timeline is rather uncertain, which, along with the mentioned bellicose rhetoric, raises questions about Baku's willingness to resolve the conflict in the first place.

Finally, the deterioration of democracy in Georgia presents another challenge to Armenia's European aspirations. Tbilisi's progress on the European path has come under increased scrutiny[72] following the adoption of the controversial law on foreign agents,[73] which runs counter to the EU values[74] and sparked widespread pro-European protests.[75] While this does not technically preclude the possibility of a successful membership bid, it introduces additional challenges to Armenia's prospects for joining the Union.

Conclusions

The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 has accelerated two processes that are sometimes perceived as incompatible: the deepening of integration and enlargement of the EU. The enlargement cannot simply be understood as a process in which candidate countries undertake the necessary reforms to meet the EU's accession conditions. It also requires the Union to accommodate these new members and avoid political and institutional paralysis. Therefore, to ensure the success of future enlargements, prior internal reform is necessary.

Since 2022, the geopolitical dimension of the EU's Enlargement Policy has been emphasized in various official documents and statements. Also, the renewed momentum for enlargement has significantly impacted the dynamics in the Eastern

[70] Sossi Tatikyan, "Armenia Pursues Peace, Azerbaijan Seeks Coercion," *EVN Report*, March 31 2025, https://evnreport.com/politics/armenia-pursues-peace/.
[71] "Armenia and Azerbaijan's Leaders Meet Briefly in Tirana as Peace Agreement Momentum Continues," *Euronews*, May 19 2025, https://www.euronews.com/2025/05/17/armenia-and-azerbaijans-leaders-meet-briefly-in-tirana-as-peace-agreement-momentum-continu.
[72] Anna Kuchenbecker, "The Geopolitical Tightrope: Balancing Georgia's EU Candidacy," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, October 24 2023, https://ecfr.eu/article/the-geopolitical-tightrope-balancing-georgias-eu-candidacy/.
[73] Liana Fix and Caroline Kapp, "The Dangers of Democratic Backsliding in Georgia," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, June 21 2023, https://www.cfr.org/article/dangers-democratic-backsliding-georgia.
[74] European External Action Service, "Georgia: Statement by the High Representative on the Adoption of the 'Foreign Influence' Law," March 7 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/georgia-statement-high-representative-adoption-%E2%80%9Cforeign-influence%E2%80%9D-law_en.
[75] Emil Avdaliani, "Playing with Fire: Georgia's Cautious Rapprochement with Russia," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 21 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90246.

neighborhood. Particularly, the initial success of Georgia's application has enabled Armenia to consider this possibility, provided it complies with both conditions of Article 49 of the TEU (being an "European" state and embracing the EU's values and norms). Moreover, relations between Yerevan and Brussels have become more ambitious, especially since September 2023, following Azerbaijan's offensive over Nagorno-Karabakh.

However, the deterioration of democracy in Georgia poses a significant challenge to Armenia's European aspirations, alongside other major obstacles. Notably, Armenia must consolidate democratic reforms and fully implement the provisions of the CEPA; it must also reduce its economic and military dependence on Russia, and achieving a peace agreement with Azerbaijan is crucial for ensuring prosperity and stability on the path to European integration.

Despite these challenges, the renewed momentum for EU enlargement presents a real opportunity to strengthen ties between the EU and Armenia, as both sides demonstrate greater ambition to enhance their association. Furthermore, even if negotiations were to take decades—or ultimately fail—due to the aforementioned challenges, Armenia's inclusion in the EU's Enlargement Policy could pave the way for broader and deeper cooperation, as well as increased funding, which would be beneficial for the overall relationship between Brussels and Yerevan.

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BUILDING BRIDGES: KUWAIT'S SUBTLE DIPLOMACY AND HUMANITARIAN SOFT POWER IN A FRACTURED REGION

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Abstract

Amidst the global transitions towards a multipolar order in the 21st century, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are emerging as a crucial regional bloc aiming for wider global relevance. Among these, Kuwait, despite being a 'small state,' has gained respect and stature through its diplomatic acumen, playing roles as a mediator and aid giver, while committing to multilateralism. This paper examines how Kuwait's foreign policy posture has evolved within the region's geopolitical structure, with a primary focus on its soft power projection through subtle diplomacy. Using a historical framework, this study highlights the emergence of Kuwait as a stabilizing actor amidst growing regional rivalries through a comparative analysis. The author concludes that despite internal structural constraints and geo-strategic external pressures, Kuwait's nuanced foreign policy approach is a good example of how small-state diplomacy can shape larger regional dynamics. Thereby, this article contributes to a broader understanding of how small states exercise global agency in regions where great power competition and intra-regional rivalries intersect.

Keywords: *Small-state diplomacy, geopolitics, GCC, soft power, hedging, balancing.*

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Introduction

Within a rapidly changing global order resulting from geopolitical rivalries, regional conflict, and erosion of multilateral institutions and norms, small states are challenged to seek stability and security through innovative foreign policy strategies. Kuwait, a small state located in a volatile region, has traditionally used strategic partnerships and security alliances to counterbalance its vulnerability against predatory regional rivals. Over the years, Kuwait's agile monarchy has also safeguarded its interests through subtle diplomacy, utilizing the art of mediation and aid-giving, as well as multilateral engagement. Kuwait thus exemplifies how small states can leverage both strategic partnerships and adopt more nuanced diplomatic approaches to navigate and secure themselves within a tumultuous landscape. Kuwait's subtle statecraft thus reflects not only an effort to maintain its sovereignty and national security but also projects a sophisticated understanding of the rapidly growing interdependence between small states and larger powers in a fractured world.

In the 21st century, small states face unique challenges as they strive to survive and exert influence within a complex international system, dominated by larger powers, although globalization, technological advancement, and multilateralism have provided them with increased agency. Deriving from the dual lens of small state security and dependency theory**,** this paper analyses how Kuwait has moved beyond alliance-building to develop subtle diplomacy and soft power as a buffer for its security challenges, thereby exerting effective normative influence in the world.

Small State Security and Dependency Theory: In international relations, although a universal definition of small states remains elusive,[1] they are largely defined by their limited population and geographical size,[2] restricted military[3] and economic capacities,[4] narrow political action space, and vulnerability to regional conflicts. While Westphalian approaches gave recognition to the sovereign rights of all states, big or small, the advent of globalization enabled them greater trade access and a voice in international forums,[5] but also exposed them to asymmetric

[1] Matthias Maass, "The Elusive Definition of the Small State," *International Politics* 46 (2009): 65–83, https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2008.37.
[2] Michael Handel, *Weak States in the International System* (London: Frank Cass, 1990), 13.
[3] Jean-Marc Rickli and Khalid S. Almezaini, "Theories of Small States' Foreign and Security Policies," in *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies before and after the Arab Spring*, ed. Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (London: Routledge, 2017), 9–10.
[4] Harvey W. Armstrong and Robert Read, "The Determinants of Economic Growth in Small States," *The Round Table* 92, no. 368 (2003): 99–124, https://doi.org/10.1080/750456745.
[5] Godfrey Baldacchino and Anders Wivel, "Small States: Concepts and Theories," in *Handbook on the Politics of Small States* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2020), 2–3.

threats and risks (immigration, terrorism, human trafficking, environmental, etc.). Although there are many small states in the world today, only a few singularly impact at the global level. However, collectively, their voice has gained considerable traction through multilateral institutions and global collaborations.[6] Small states have traditionally experimented with many alliance roles, including neutrality, balancing, and bandwagoning.[7] More recently, they have opted for strategic hedging as a survival strategy[8] to secure themselves from becoming a pawn in a great power conflict.

Dependency theory exemplifies the overreliance of small states on alliances and partnerships to counter their innumerable geopolitical challenges arising from great power conflicts, regional disputes, and contested border issues. Often, they become susceptible to volatility in global markets and prices.[9] Small states also seek infrastructural and technical support arising from limited indigenous expertise and training. The COVID-19 revealed their challenges in health care, access to medications, and vaccines, limiting their capacity to recover from such hazards.[10] Further, the ecosystems of small states remain particularly vulnerable to land erosion and environmental degradation,[11] arising from climate change. As a result, small states face critical dependency,[12] arising from comprehensive security challenges.

Apart from strategic partnerships and bilateral arrangements, the main strategies used by small states to offset their multifarious challenges include multilateralism by leveraging international law and institutions, economic diversification through investment in special services - sports, tourism, banking, development of green energy and digital economies and diplomatic initiatives through climate advocacy, conflict mediation and humanitarian aid. By exerting soft power, through such subtle diplomatic overtures, small states can exert a non-coercive influence both on the

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[6] Iver B. Neumann and Sieglinde Gstöhl, "Introduction: Lilliputians in Gulliver's World?" in *Small States in International Relations*, ed. Christine Ingebritsen, Iver Neumann, and Sieglinde Gstöhl (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 3–36.

[7] Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 17; Brittnee Carter, "Revisiting the Bandwagoning Hypothesis: A Statistical Analysis of the Alliance Dynamics of Small States," *International Studies* 59, no. 1 (2022): 7–27.

[8] Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Getting Hedging Right: A Small-State Perspective," *China International Strategy Review* 3, no. 2 (2021): 300–315, https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-021-00089-5.

[9] Harvey W.Armstrong and Robert Read. "Trade and Growth in Small States: The Impact of Global Trade
Liberalisation." *World Economy* 21, no. 4 (1998): https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9701.00148.

[10] Hillary Briffa, "Small States and COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities for Multilateralism," *Global Perspectives* 4, no. 1 (2023): 57708, https://doi.org/10.1525/gp.2023.57708.

[11] Matthew L. Bishop, "The Political Economy of Small States: Enduring Vulnerability?" *Review of International Political Economy* 19, no. 5 (2012): 942–960, https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2011.635118.

[12] Peter J. Katzenstein, "Small States and Small States Revisited," *New Political Economy* 8, no. 1 (2003): 9–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/1356346032000078705.

regional and the global stage.[13] The more affluent small states have established soft power using financial aid for disaster relief, capacity building, poverty alleviation, post conflict reconstruction etc., to enhance their global agency such as, Singapore, Norway, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Qatar, Malta, Andorra, Liechtenstein, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait. The state of Kuwait's adoption of niche diplomacy to enhance its soft power and counterbalance its vulnerabilities remains the focus of this study.

Literature Review: There has been considerable academic writing on how small states navigate their foreign policy, despite limited security capabilities. It is argued that small states can utilize political economy, good governance, and diplomatic mediation as soft power to defy their territorial limitations, as seen in Singapore and Vatican City.[14] Although small states lack coercive power, Sweden and Norway have repeatedly sponsored peace negotiations, as seen in the Oslo Accords.[15] The successful mediatory role of small states in the Madrid Review Conference of 1983 suggests a more empirical approach to conflict resolution.[16] Effectively increasing its foreign policy reach, Mongolia has emerged as a neutral peace broker in the Korean conflict since 2013, as seen in the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue initiatives.[17]

Despite having limited production possibilities to suit the consumption needs of an affluent society, Luxembourg has effectively used economic diplomacy through FDI and developmental assistance, far above other EU nations.[18] Similarly, Estonia's status, despite its small size, was boosted by its aid impact on Georgia and Moldova.[19] However, aid policies of small states can differ from those of larger

[13] Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy* 80 (1990): 153–171, https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580; Binod K. Timilsana, "Soft Power and Small States: A Theoretical Discussion," *Journal of Political Science* (2024): 139–158, https://doi.org/10.3126/jps.v24i1.62860.

[14] Alan Chong, "Small State Soft Power Strategies: Virtual Enlargement in the Cases of the Vatican City State and Singapore," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 23, no. 3 (2010): 383–405, https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2010.484048.

[15] Fride Lia Stensland, "What Role Did Norway Really Play in the Oslo Process? A Case Study in Small-State Mediation," *Israel Studies Review* 38, no. 2 (2023): 30–47, https://doi.org/10.3167/isr.2023.380204.

[16] William I. Zartman, "Mediation Roles for Large Small Countries," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 19, no. 1 (2013): 13–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/13600829208443013.

[17] Shinae Hong, "The Diplomatic Power of Small States: Mongolia's Mediation on the Korean Peninsula," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 76, no. 4 (2022): 415–431, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2022.2056577.

[18] Helen Kavvadia et al., *The Economic Diplomacy of Small States: A Case Study of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg* (SSRN, March 28, 2018), http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3568999.

[19] Matthew Crandall and Ingrid Varov, "Developing Status as a Small State: Estonia's Foreign Aid Strategy," *East European Politics* 32, no. 4 (2016): 405–425, https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2016.1221817.

states, as seen in the examples of Sweden and the US, where small states give both higher quality aid and give it more generously than larger states.[20]

The small GCC states, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman have each cultivated a unique identity through niche diplomatic efforts such as global aid, developmental assistance, peace mediation, environmental and climate advocacy, economic and financial services, multilateralism, media diplomacy, global branding through sports, financial services, educational partnerships, and security cooperation, as cornerstones of their foreign policy. Focusing on the increasing centralization of humanitarian governance, funding, and capacities in logistics and operations among Gulf donors, scholars have analyzed the dynamics of politicization and securitization that have made these states play diverse roles in regional and international systems through humanitarian aid and mediation.[21] By analyzing the factors that motivate financial aid in the UAE and Kuwait using the Heckit model, it is evident that cultural and geographic proximity, along with human development, are key drivers.[22] Similarly, aid is largely disbursed based on strategic geopolitical and security interests, although social aims still factor in the distribution of aid from the UAE and Kuwait.[23]

It is also seen that foreign aid of some Gulf states has transformed after 9/11 and the 2011 Arab uprisings, shifting from a solidarity-based aid model to one strategically aligned with political and military geopolitical interests, particularly in regions like Yemen, Libya, and Syria.[24] Comparing the mediation efforts of Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar in the Yemen conflict, it is observed that when the level of independence in a small state's foreign policy is high, it is more likely to engage with proscribed actors, as seen in the case of Kuwait and Oman. However, the choices of Qatar were influenced by a certain level of dependence on Saudi Arabia.[25] However, although these states are rebranding themselves in terms of dis-

[20] Stephen J. Hoadley, "Small States as Aid Donors," *International Organization* 34, no. 1 (1980): 121–137, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300003994.

[21] Ghassan Elkahlout and Sansom Milton, "The Evolution of the Gulf States as Humanitarian Donors," *Third World Quarterly* 45, nos. 15–16 (2023): 2246–2265, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2023.2229742.

[22] Beata Udvari, Katalin Kis, and Péter Halmosi, "Generosity or Economic Reasons? Motivations of Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates for Aid Allocations," *International Journal of Diplomacy and Economy* 4, no. 2 (2018): 81–106, https://doi.org/10.1504/IJDIPE.2018.094088.

[23] Jaromir Harmáček, Zdeněk Opršal, and Pavla Vítová, "Aid, Trade or Faith? Questioning Narratives and Territorial Pattern of Gulf Foreign Aid," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 24, no. 5 (2022): 772–794, https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2022.2037958.

[24] Mohammad Yaghi, Hanaa Almoaibed, and Silvia Colombo, "Foreign Aid of Gulf States: Continuity and Change," *Third World Quarterly* 45, nos. 15–16 (2024): 2145–2154, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2024.2431294.

[25] Freke Leene, "Small States, Big Fish: Comparing Kuwaiti, Omani, and Qatari Foreign Policy and Engagement with Proscribed Armed Groups During Mediation in Yemen" (master's thesis, 2023), https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1762844/FULLTEXT01.pdf.

tancing from terrorist sponsorship, transparency in allocation patterns, sources of aid provision, and coordination with multilateral organizations, these factors are merely based on self-reporting and therefore can be contentious.[26]

In Kuwait, foreign policy is guided by conceptions of both 'national' and 'regime' security interests rather than 'any ideational attachment to mediation', thereby creating space for soft balancing in regional and global stages.[27] Kuwait's allocation of aid was initially influenced by internal and external factors such as the threat of annexation by Iraq, the prevention of the spread of Iran's Islamic revolution, and the support for pan-Arab causes. However, since the Gulf War, it has been used to reward nations that supported it, and after 9/11, Kuwait has leveraged its foreign aid to advance its interests during the war in Lebanon, the 2011 Arab uprisings, and the 2018 summit for the reconstruction of Iraq.[28] Kuwait's foreign policy tools, development assistance, and mediation in the Middle East from 2003 to 2014 are closely related to interdependence, soft power, and national interests.[29] In the Qatar Gulf crisis (2017), where the US and Kuwait presented third-party intervention, it was seen that small-state mediation was more effective in crisis de-escalation, while superpower mediation could exacerbate it.[30] Kuwait's success was in mediating through strategies parallel to the balance of power and soft power concepts, while not using any directive strategies in the mediation.[31] Kuwait's role as mediator in some conflicts while remaining neutral in others and its consummate multilateralism within the region and at the global level are factors that make Kuwait significant on the global stage.[32] Kuwait's humanitarian aid policy involves much coordination at multiple levels of state policy, civil society organizations,

[26] Mohammad Yaghi, "9/11 and Branding the Gulf States' Foreign Aid," *Third World Quarterly* 45, nos. 15–16 (2024): 2155–2174, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2024.2304219.
[27] Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Kuwait as a Mediator in Regional Affairs: The Gulf Crises of 2014 and 2017," *The International Spectator* 56, no. 4 (2021): 119–133, https://doi.org/10.1080/-03932729.2021.1982293.
[28] Mohammad Yaghi, "Kuwait's Foreign Aid: Motivations and Allocations," in *The Making of Contemporary Kuwait: Identity, Politics, and Its Survival Strategy*, ed. Mahjoob Zweiri and Sinem Cengiz (London: Routledge, 2024), 69–87.
[29] Mohamed Naser, "Kuwait's Foreign Policy towards Regional Issues in the Middle East from 2003 to 2014," *Asian Social Science* 13, no. 11 (2017): 95–108, https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v13n11p95.
[30] Ibrahim Fraihat, "Superpower and Small-State Mediation in the Qatar Gulf Crisis," *The International Spectator* 55, no. 2 (2020): 79–91, https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1741268.
[31] Huzeyfe Altiok, "Kuwait's Mediation in the Gulf Crisis: Dynamics of Kuwait's Foreign Policy Approaches," in *Social Change in the Gulf Region: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2023), 597–618.
[32] Joshua Kirkhope-Arkley, "Balancing the Scales: Kuwait's Neutrality Amidst Geopolitical Rivalries in a F(r)actious Middle East," *The Columbia Journal of Asia* 1, no. 1 (2022): 159–174, https://doi.org/10.52214/cja.v1i1.9356.

and individual donors who volunteer and fund international Islamic charities.[33] Kuwait's charitable and developmental aid policy also extends towards Africa, which has enabled its political clout, seen in its support for Kuwait's election as a non-permanent member to the UN Security Council in 2017.[34]

The above literature review depicts significant gaps, such as limited theoretical engagement with small state behavior relating to niche diplomacy, pros and cons of Kuwait's mediation efforts and humanitarian aid, domestic drivers of Kuwait's subtle diplomacy, and limited literature comparing such policy between Kuwait and similar small states of the GCC. Deriving from these gaps, this paper analyses how Kuwait navigates specific strategies of niche diplomacy, to gain regional and global impact, using the following research questions:

1. How has Kuwait constructed and leveraged its foreign policy through niche diplomacy?
2. What are the domestic drivers of Kuwait's foreign policy relating to niche diplomacy?
3. What are the advantages and constraints for Kuwait while using niche diplomacy?
4. How does Kuwait compare with other small GCC states in balancing soft power?
5. How can niche diplomacy serve as a sustainable soft power tool for small states?

Kuwait: Small State in a Turbulent Neighborhood

Historically, in international relations, small states have largely remained passive actors with limited agency and influence, often subjected to the rule playbook of big powers. However, in the aftermath of decolonization and the fall of the erstwhile USSR, more small states have come into existence. These small states seek to adopt a foreign policy that is more proactive in the international arena, using their geostrategic assets to play an impactful role, far greater than their size and population. Kuwait is one such state with vast fossil fuel resources, located at the critical junction connecting the East and the West in the Arabian Gulf, surrounded by large powers - Iraq and Iran. Kuwait's diplomatic culture emanates from its Arab tribal antecedents. In the Arab world, tribal relations have endured through in-

[33] Mara A. Leichtman, "Humanitarian Sovereignty, Exceptional Muslims, and the Transnational Making of Kuwaiti Citizens," *Ethnography* 24, no. 3 (2023): 407–431, http://dx.doi.org/10.52214/cja.v1i1.9356.

[34] Mara A. Leichtman, "Kuwait's Foreign Relations with East Africa," in *The Gulf States and the Horn of Africa: Interests, Influences and Instability*, ed. Robert Mason and Simon Mabon (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), 199–226, https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526162175.00015.

numerable conflicting and contentious relationships, scarce resources, and a deep sense of tribal honor. Often, when conflicts arose between tribes, a third party (a respected *Shaikh* or leader of a neutral tribe) would be asked to assume the role of a mediator, to ensure that all tribes could live in peace, sharing the limited resources. The two main Arabic terms associated with such diplomacy are *'Sulh'* and *'musalaha,'* signifying techniques of conflict resolution emphasizing mediation, reconciliation, and fostering of enduring relationships.[35] Deriving from such a culture of neutral third-party mediation, Kuwait's leaders earned respect for their neutrality, wisdom, and statesmanship in conflict mediation, especially among the six Gulf states that originated from similar tribal traditions.

In 1961, Kuwait severed its status as a British protectorate, gained statehood, established semi-democratic institutions, and soon began its journey as a leading oil exporter and key player in world oil trade. However, Kuwait's immense wealth only rendered it more vulnerable due to encroachment by its aggressive neighbors. The attack on Kuwait by Saddam Hussein in 1990 revealed the strategic vulnerability of Kuwait despite guarantees of support from regional institutions such as the GCC and the Arab League. Therein, Kuwait's security dependency through security and military partnerships with the US, UK, and France was necessary to secure its borders. This included allowing foreign military bases and forward deployment and posturing. However, with the waning of US engagement in the Arabian Gulf region, even as the world is transcending to a multipolar order, and the rise of regional rivalries within the GCC, Kuwait seeks to avoid becoming a pawn in global and regional great power rivalries. Kuwait has adopted a policy of strategic hedging[36] to safeguard its economic and security interests, forming multilateral partnerships with China, Turkey, India, and Russia, even as it continues its older partnerships with the US, France, and the UK. Such balancing is viewed as mandatory for Kuwait's security as well as economic growth.[37]

Kuwait's Niche Diplomacy

Kuwait has also been driven to adopt comprehensive security strategies through neutrality, mediation, conflict resolution, and financial aid as an intrinsic part of its

[35] George E. Irani, "Apologies and Reconciliation: Middle Eastern Rituals," in *Taking Wrongs Seriously: Apologies and Reconciliation*, ed. Elazar Barkan and Alexander Karn (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2006), 132–150, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804767804-009.

[36] İsmail N. Telci and Mehmet Rakipoğlu, "Hedging as a Survival Strategy for Small States: The Case of Kuwait," *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 10, no. 2 (2021): 213–229, https://doi.org/10.20991/allazimuth.960945.

[37] Abdullah K. Alshayji, "Kuwait's Security Dilemma: The Balancing Acts of a Small Nation-State," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 33, no. 3 (2010): 59–81, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jsa.2010.0006.

foreign policy initiatives.[38] It has juggled neutrality in regional conflicts, soft power balancing through humanitarian and development aid, often referred to as Dinar Diplomacy,[39] and mediation to gain credibility and significant influence in the UN, Arab League, GCC, and many other multilateral institutions.

Kuwait's mediation role was evidenced after its independence between Bahrain and Iran in 1968, between Abu Dhabi and Dubai, which led to the formation of the UAE in 1971, and between Qatar and Saudi Arabia in 2003. Kuwait was also the major force behind the inception of the GCC in 1981, validating the need for regional multilateral diplomacy. Abdullah Bishara, a Kuwaiti diplomat, became the GCC's first Secretary General. The role of Kuwait's Late Emir, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, who was a key statesman and foreign minister of Kuwait for four decades, is also noteworthy as the architect of Kuwait's niche diplomacy. Known as a doyen of diplomacy in the region, he earned respect through his wide experience, astute leadership, and able and subtle networking abilities within the Arab world. After his passing in 2020, the region is witnessing a shift towards more aggressive use of niche diplomacy by new age leaders such as Prince Mohammad Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani of Qatar and Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the UAE, thereby over shadowing Kuwait's more restrained approach. Maintaining Kuwait's stature and reputation as a subtle and effective mediator requires more engaged and consistent efforts, even as Kuwait transitions into the hands of a new generation of leaders. Some of Kuwait's efforts at mediation in the last four decades are detailed in Table 2.

Table 1: Kuwait's mediation efforts in some regional conflicts

Case	Role	Methods Used	Outcomes
PLO-Jordan conflict (1970s)[40]	Encouraged reconciliation via the Arab League	Non-confrontational diplomacy using ties with the Palestinian leadership	Limited success, supported Arab unity in major forums
Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990)	Mediation through the Arab League, and financial support	Early outreach and mediation efforts	Groundwork for the Taif agreement of 1988
Yemen North-South Conflict (1972)	Brokered Kuwait Agreement	Hosted talks in Kuwait City	Formal agreement on unification signed

[38] Radhika Lakshminarayanan, *Small State Security Dilemma: Kuwait after 1991* (Chennai: Notion Press, 2019), 101–103.
[39] Abdul-Reda Assiri, *Kuwait's Foreign Policy: City-State in World Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 26–27.
[40] Abdul-Reda Assiri, "Kuwait's dinar diplomacy: the role of donor-mediator." *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 3 (1991). ProQuest.

Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988)	Key participant in GCC and UN-led advocacy efforts	Quiet diplomacy, Logistical and humanitarian support	Helped support ceasefire diplomacy (UNSCR 598)
Iraq Post-2003 Reconciliation Diplomacy	Support to normalize GCC and Arab ties with post-Saddam Iraq	Engagement through the Arab League, bilateral visits	Improved Kuwait-Iraq ties supported the reintegration of Iraq regionally
Sudan and Darfur Conflict (2007 onward)	Support to Arab/African peace efforts, humanitarian diplomacy	Donor conferences, mediation support	The political mediation role is secondary
Lebanese Political Crisis (2008)	Mediator through the Arab League and bilateral diplomacy	Quiet diplomacy, support for unity governments	Helped de-escalate tensions, reinforced Kuwait's neutrality
Post Arab Spring crisis between Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE, and Qatar (2013-14)[41]	Key Mediator between GCC members	Back-channel talks emphasizing Arab unity	The Riyadh Supplementary Agreement (November 16, 2014)
Yemen Peace Talks (2016)[42]	Hosted the UN-sponsored peace talks in Kuwait City	Providing a neutral venue, support to the UN process	Talks were unsuccessful, though Kuwait's efforts were commendable
2017–2021 Gulf Crisis (Qatar Blockade)[43]	Key mediator between Qatar and the blockading states (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain)	Shuttle diplomacy, back-channel talks, Public calls for dialogue	Helped maintain dialogue, reduced escalation, and Laid groundwork for Al-Ula Declaration (2021)
General Arab Conflicts (e.g., Syria, Libya)	Advocacy for dialogue within the Arab League, NAM, OIC, and GCC.	Multilateral diplomacy, hosting summits, a bridge-builder: radical and conservative Arab states	Recognition of Kuwait's role as a neutral peace broker for Arab unity

[41] Marwan Kabalan, "Kuwait's GCC Mediation: Incentives and Reasons for Failure," in *The GCC Crisis at One Year: Stalemate Becomes New Reality* (Washington, DC: Arab Center, 2018), 23–30, https://arabcenterdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Stalemate-becomes-reality.pdf#page=23.

[42] Robert Forster, "Toward a Comprehensive Solution? Yemen's Two-Year Peace Process," *Middle East Journal* 71, no. 3 (2017): 479–488, https://www.jstor.org/stable/90016474.

[43] Abdulhadi Alajmi, "The Gulf Crisis: An Insight into Kuwait's Mediation Efforts," *International Relations and Diplomacy* 6, no. 10 (2018): 2328–2134, https://doi.org/10.17265/2328-2134/2018.10.002.

Table 1 indicates that Kuwait establishes credibility as a mediator capable of driving conflict resolution, by providing a neutral platform for negotiations as a host in regional peace-making conferences, relying on 'behind the scenes' efforts using back channels with Iran and Iraq, leveraging its relations with the GCC monarchies, and using multilateral institutions. Comparing Kuwait's efforts at niche diplomacy with other small GCC states (Table 2), we see that Kuwait focuses on quiet diplomacy and a more balanced foreign policy, although it lacks the high-profile visibility and aggressive soft power branding in comparison to the UAE and Qatar.

Table 2: Comparison of soft power in GCC: Kuwait, UAE, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain

Policy elements	Kuwait	UAE	Qatar	Oman	Bahrain
Posturing and Branding	Limited branding, Subtle diplomacy, Neutrality, Active Mediation	High Branding, Aggressive global player, Rapid modernization	High Branding-Assertive and influential diplomacy	Soft branding, Quiet Diplomacy, Neutral mediation	Soft Branding, Open economy
Soft Power tools	Humanitarian and Development aid, UN alignment	Tourism, Business hub, Conferences, Expo, moderate humanitarian aid	Hub for Sports (World Cup 2022, Formula 1 Grand Prix), Education city, Finance, Media (Al Jazeera), humanitarian and development aid	'Ibadism' (Tolerance and dialogue, Sultan Qaboos Chairs and Cultural Centers, Tourism, logistics	Sports (Formula 1 Grand Prix), cultural events, finance, tourism, and information technology
Diversification	Slow cautious approach	Rapid and well diversified	Rapid Progress	Steady progress	Steady Progress
Sovereign Wealth Fund and investment	Kuwait Investment Authority	Abu Dhabi Investment Authority	Qatar Investment Authority	Oman Investment Authority	*Mumtalakat Holding Company*
Strategic Engagement	Defensive military alliances, multilateral	Proactive military alliances-US,	Al Udeid US air base, Turkish base-	US Joint Logistics Support Base at	Strong US alignment, HQ of U.S. Navy's

	security, Neutrality, Logistic support through US bases in Afghanistan	France, Overt and covert engagement in Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen, the Abraham Accords	Doha, logistic support in the Afghanistan conflict	Duqm, Bilateral partnerships, neutrality, Logistics support to the US in Afghanistan	Fifth Fleet, Limited Engagement - Afghanistan military operations - Houthis
Geopolitical Thrust	Neutrality, strategic balancing (Iran, Iraq, GCC), and multipolar hedging	US alignment, hedging with China, India	US bases, Hedging with Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia	US bases, Strategic hedging, and multi-engagement	Balancing strategies, Alignment with the US and Saudi Arabia

Kuwait also provides developmental and humanitarian aid through national institutions, NGOs, and multilateral organizations. As early as 1962, the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) was established to disburse loans for development assistance**,** infrastructure, health, education, and economic growth in developing countries. Aid is also disbursed through the Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS), which provides emergency humanitarian relief in disaster zones and conflict-ridden areas. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), through the Department of Development and International Cooperation, coordinates Kuwait's contributions towards UN programs, humanitarian summits, regional crises, and works in cooperation with other state charitable organizations and NGO's that provide aid to Islamic charities for education, orphan relief, and healthcare. Kuwait also partners with UN agencies such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNICEF, World Food Program (WFP), and UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UCHA). Kuwait was also recognized as an 'international humanitarian center' by the UN, and its Amir, Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah, was awarded for Humanitarian leadership in 2014. As a center for humanitarian excellence, Kuwait facilitates partnerships with international agencies and NGOs, as well as enables capacity-building through training programs, workshops, and knowledge-sharing initiatives. Since its independence in 1961, Kuwait has played a key role as an aid giver (Table 3):

Table 3: Brief profile of Kuwait as an aid giver (1961- 2025)[44]

Region	Recipient Country	Type of Aid	Institutional mechanism
Arab Region	Palestine (West Bank/Gaza)	Refugee aid, education, health care, reconstruction	UNHRA, NGO's, Direct aid
	Yemen	Disaster relief, Infrastructure development, healthcare, humanitarian aid	KFAED, MOFA,
	Lebanon	Emergency relief, Infrastructure development	Arab League, MOFA,
	Egypt	Infrastructure, Economic Development	KFAED
	Sudan	Power Generation, Water Projects	KFAED
	Jordan	Post-war reconstruction	KFAED, MOFA
	To Syrian refugees (in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey)	Refugee aid, Pledging conferences	MOFA, UNHCR, NGO's
African Region	Morocco, Senegal, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Uganda, Benin, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Chad, Gabon	Agriculture, Energy, hospitals, airports, water, and sanitation works	KFAED
	Somalia, Ethiopia	Food, water, Healthcare, Emergency relief	KFAED, KRCS
	Tanzania	Textile Industry, Port Improvement	KFAED
	Kenya	Infrastructure, Health, Education	KFAED, NGO's
Middle East	Iran	Earthquake relief	MOFA
	Afghanistan	Refugee relief, Humanitarian aid, support for Islamic charities, education	NGO's, MOFA, KFAED, UNHCR, WFP, KRCS
	Iraq	Post-war Reconstruction and humanitarian aid	KFAED, Direct donations, UN forums
Asia	Indonesia	Tsunami/earthquake/flood relief	UNDP, UNICEF, KRCS
	Pakistan	Earthquake/Flood relief	UNICEF, KRCS, WFP, KFAED
	Philippines	Typhoon relief, healthcare	UNICEF, KRCS, IFRC
	India	COVID-19 aid/disaster relief	WHO, KRCS,

[44] **Source:** Data corroborated from KFAED Annual Reports.
Table 3 shows that Kuwait's aid contributions have extended beyond Arab and Islamic states to include multiple countries from different regions of the world.

			KFAED
	Sri Lanka	Tsunami relief, Poverty alleviation, infrastructure	UNDP, UNICEF, KRCS, KFAED
	Maldives	Environmental conservation	UNDP, UNICEF, KFAED
	Thailand	Flood relief, Healthcare	UNICEF, KRCS, WFP
	Nepal	Earthquake relief, Education, Health care	UNDP, UNICEF, KRCS
	Myanmar	Rohingya refugee aid, Medical supplies, Food relief	UNHCR, WFP, KRCS
	Bangladesh	Rohingya refugee relief, shelter, and healthcare	KRCS, UNHCR, KFAED, WFP
Latin America	Argentina, Cuba	Sustainable development, Infrastructure	KRCS, UN agencies, and Direct support
The Caribbean	Haiti	Earthquake relief, pandemic support, and food aid	KFAED
Europe	Italy- 1980	Earthquake relief	MOFA
	Poland-2022	Ukrainian refugee aid, Medical aid, humanitarian relief	KRCS, UN Agencies
Global Aid (2020-2021	50 nations	COVID-19 pandemic	Kuwait Pandemic Response Fund

Domestic Constraints Driving Kuwait's Foreign Policy

Kuwait faces considerable domestic challenges emanating from its single resource dependence on fossil fuels, which account for 90% of government revenue, rendering Kuwait vulnerable to high fluctuations in global oil prices. Kuwait also faces demographic challenges from a low indigenous population and overdependence on expatriate labor that forms 70% of Kuwait's population, particularly in critical fields like infrastructure, construction, healthcare, essential services, and domestic labor. Although Kuwait created the world's first Sovereign Wealth Fund (SWF) as a financial buffer for a post-oil future, and it is still among the largest globally, its long-term sustainability depends on reform, growth, and successful diversification measures. Kuwait is also restrained by its relatively open political system with a quasi-democratic parliament, which leads to constitutional deadlocks, public debates, and opposition-led executive-legislative conflicts, which only hinder the nation's growth. Kuwait has a large youth population, and although this is seen as a demographic dividend, its high expectations for public sector employment and hesitation to enter the private sector put considerable pressure on Kuwait's government, resulting from the cradle-to-grave welfare model that is entrenched in Ku-

wait's constitution.[45] To address these challenges, Kuwait has launched considerable initiatives through its 'Vision 2035'; however, its progress is slow and limited due to corruption, bureaucratic inertia, political gridlock, and administrative self-interest. Kuwait is also among the most water-scarce nations in the world, depending almost exclusively on desalination plants along the Arabian Gulf waters. Coupled with extreme climate change and rising summer temperatures, Kuwait relies on high energy consumption, which may not be sustainable in the long run.

These domestic pressures and Kuwait's external strategic vulnerability have contributed to Kuwait's emphasis on consensus and caution, which have slowed diversification efforts, limited visibility, and global branding. Unlike its small state neighbors, Kuwait has not yet developed its soft power using assertive branding through tourism, international sports, cultural events, and a business-friendly environment, although such efforts are in the pipeline. Therein, intentionally using quiet diplomacy, avoiding regional military engagement, focusing on humanitarian aid, mediation, and multilateralism has proven a more sustainable foreign policy approach for Kuwait.

Discussion

Small states often use soft power as a key component of their foreign policy to enhance their strategic interests. Despite limited capabilities, small states can seek leverage through diplomatic overtures like aid and mediation. Such strategies enhance their global reputation and image, build a network of responsive partners, and foster goodwill without being seen as a selfish aggressor or bully. This enables them to gain influence within international organizations, like the UN, where aid contributions can help them gain recognition within larger coalitions or secure favorable votes towards key resolutions. The positioning of small states in supporting humanitarian causes provides them a moral stance as champions of peace and human dignity in a norm-based society. Further, small states also gain critical strategic access within aid recipient nations, which can boost their security interests and provide trade and investment opportunities. Therefore, for small states, such soft power strategies help to compensate for their logistical inadequacies and enable considerable influence to survive in the present interconnected and interdependent world.

The main objective of this paper was to analyze how Kuwait uses niche diplomacy to make an impact within a multipolar world. Responding to our first re-

[45] Radhika Lakshminarayanan, "Youth Development in Kuwait: Dimensions of Civic Participation and Community Engagement towards Nation Building," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 2 (2020): 230–250, https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12221.

search question on the construction and leveraging of Kuwait's niche diplomacy we see that although Kuwait may be seen as a muted player in the regional and global scene, in comparison with its more prominent neighbors, a close study of Kuwait's posture indicates that it is playing a different game by its own rules and standards. Kuwait seeks to project economic stability, diplomatic reliability, and financial credibility through humanitarian leadership and peace mediation. Kuwait's subtle diplomacy is deliberately and carefully calibrated, deeply rooted in its history, society, and culture. Given its turbulent past, Kuwait seeks to avoid a similar debacle by refraining from polarizing, provoking, and taking sides.

Our second research question is on the domestic drivers of Kuwait's policy of niche diplomacy. Kuwait's dependence on a single resource represents an inherent need for economic diversification, experience with war and destruction, and the state's accountability to public debate due to its quasi-democratic political system drives Kuwait's stance of cautious neutrality and mediation in foreign policy. Additionally, through humanitarian aid, Kuwait seeks to project itself as using its affluence to champion global development and support humanitarian causes across the world.

Regarding our third research question, on the advantages and constraints of this policy, we note that Kuwait has deliberately adopted a quiet and benevolent foreign policy aimed at protection and survival. As a mediator, Kuwait has won some degree of credibility as a sincere and non-partisan peace broker, e.g., the 2017 Gulf crisis, the Yemen conflict, and even moderating dialogue with Iran. Unlike other Gulf monarchies, Kuwait's executive is more accountable to public discourse and a free media; therefore, more aggressive leanings in the Israel-Palestine conflict or Sunni-Shia rivalries remain sensitive. A low profile and neutral foreign policy stance thus enable Kuwait to maintain an 'open door' and flexible approach that protects its national interests and safeguards its sovereignty at all costs.

To answer our fourth question comparing Kuwait with small states in the GCC, we note that Kuwait's niche diplomacy is quite distinct from other GCC states. A purview of Table 2, elucidates that while the UAE has largely diversified its economy to be recognized as a vibrant business hub in the region, Qatar has diversified through sports, conferences and educational infrastructure, and Oman through tourism and culture focus, Kuwait has only now begun similar efforts through its Kuwait Vision 2035. However, while the UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain have been overtly or covertly taking sides in regional conflicts, Kuwait has strictly maintained neutrality and shown immense capability to mediate within the GCC.

Our final research question was to analyze whether such niche diplomacy can serve as a sustainable soft power tool for small states. Kuwait is deeply shaped by

its external security challenges and domestic constraints; however, its quiet and niche diplomacy, economic buffers, and political institutions have provided it with significant tools to navigate an increasingly complex and fractured international order. By emphasizing niche diplomacy, Kuwait has acquired a reputation as a peace builder without seeming to meddle in regional politics. This is a more tenable posture given Kuwait's exposure to violent and destructive conflicts, its more revisionist neighbors, Iraq and Iran, and the need to balance among the Sunni, Shia, as well as tribal elements within its borders. Similar image branding as a humanitarian state and bridge builder can garner considerable voice for small states in international and regional organizations. However, while humanitarian aid can be a powerful tool for soft power, it also has significant risks and limitations.

Financial aid is often perceived as non-altruistic and politically motivated, which undermines the credibility of the donor state and reduces its effectiveness. Such efforts have been criticized as 'Aid washing' for image building, often to distract or overshadow human rights violations or military aggression. Financial aid can also create a kind of dependency among the aid recipients that can delay growth, and retard self-sufficiency. Mismanagement of aid by corrupt government agencies or NGO's can enable wrongful access and use for nefarious activities like militarization, terrorism, smuggling, etc. Aid may also be used by donors as a means to influence political processes and policies that align with the donor's geopolitical interests, thereby undermining the operational legitimacy of local governance of the recipient nation. Aid allocation may also favor states with similar religion, culture, or ideology, thereby excluding other needy nations. When small states prioritize funds for aid to enhance their national image, sometimes sidelining domestic issues like poverty, unemployment, or health care, it can cause discontent among the indigenous population of the donor nations. It is therefore essential for small states to carefully design and implement humanitarian aid programs that prioritize the needs of the recipients, align with broader domestic and humanitarian principles, and ensure that the aid provided is effective, transparent, and ethically sound.

Conclusion

Kuwait, located in a particularly volatile and complex region in the world, exudes typical elements of small state dependency and vulnerability. Therefore, investing in niche diplomacy forms an effective foreign policy strategy to protect its national security interests. Using a historical framework and comparative analysis, this paper examined Kuwait's soft power projection towards its national branding as a stabilizing actor in the region.

Kuwait largely relies on 'quiet and subtle diplomacy' using more of covert mediation through back channels, to achieve results. While its efforts are credible, back-channel encounters are neither officially documented nor published, and, therefore, any study is limited in reliance on secondary sources such as media reports and published accounts from think tanks and international bodies, which often lack nation-specific contexts. Another limitation is that local statistical databases of the government do not have consistent and uniform longitudinal data on Kuwait's financial aid and mediation efforts across decades; hence, much information cannot be corroborated. While this study focused on Kuwait's niche diplomacy, it did not analyze how Kuwait's foreign aid and mediation efforts are institutionalized**,** through specific channels like the KFAED or MOFA; their structures, funding models and operational norms, as well as by non-state actors like the Zakat house and KRCS, which future research can work on. Further quantitative studies could also be done on the effectiveness of Kuwait's aid vis-à-vis specific sectors like education, healthcare, food security, infrastructure development, etc. Thereby providing scope for studying the more tangible impact of financial aid on recipient countries.

Kuwait is among the few GCC states that seek to play a key role in back-channeling dialogue not only within the GCC but also between the GCC states and Iran. Within the emerging geopolitical tensions and the elusive nuclear deal with Iraq, navigating mediation through neutrality and statesmanship can be a game-changer for this small state. As the internal dynamics of the GCC become more complex and competitive, with conflicting interests for regional domination and economic diversification, Kuwait can be a major player in building bridges between these states, each attempting to outdo the other in terms of international branding and soft power.

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 STRATEGIC ROLE OF CENTRAL ASIA IN A CHANGING WORLD ORDER: RESOURCES, LOGISTICS, AND COMPETITION

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Abstract

The article examines the key geopolitical factors influencing the competitive geo-economic dynamics in Central Asia, with a particular focus on the roles and political priorities of external actors. Central Asia, with its key geographic position on the Eurasian continent, occupies a strategic position in the foreign policy agendas of Russia and China, driven by both security and economic considerations. The United States, the European Union (EU), and Turkey also maintain substantial engagement in the region. Hence, the article analyzes the policies of these external actors in Central Asia, highlighting how, in the context of an evolving global order, their approaches differ significantly and produce varied effects on the region's political stability and developmental trajectories. In this context, the study examines how transport and logistics policies affect the foreign policies of Central Asian states and what strategic issues these states are trying to resolve by participating in regional and international transport routes. The article further addresses key aspects related to the region's long-term geopolitical and geo-economic prospects. It also analyzes the degree of engagement by South Caucasus countries, especially Azerbaijan and Georgia, in Central Asia's transport and logistics networks, along with the broader infrastructural linkages between the two regions.

Keywords: *Central Asia, Belt and Road Initiative, Global Gateway, transport policy, logistics.*

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Introduction

Central Asia holds strategic significance within Eurasia, primarily due to its abundant energy and mineral resources. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this resource-rich region has become a focal point for major international powers seeking to secure access and influence.

Central Asia holds high security importance for Russia. Developments in the region are always observed from the perspective of Russia's vital interests and national security. In parallel, Central Asian states are engaged in various integration organizations with Russia, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

After independence, the region has gained key importance as a transit and logistics hub. This has been highlighted most in terms of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Increased competition within the region is characterized by vying actors who wish to supplant each other's influence, in so doing generating conflicts of interest that will be detrimental to the internal political sustainability of the Central Asian states.

Here, the events in the region, on the one hand, are political and economic drivers, but simultaneously, they cause security issues for the Central Asian states themselves. Assessing Central Asia through the prism of West-Russia rivalry, it becomes apparent that the West seeks to undermine Russia's foothold in the region and to leverage, as fully as possible, the region's critical logistics corridors between East and West.

For China, the region is an important corridor to organize the export of goods to Western Asia and Europe, which, in turn, leads to the growth of Chinese influence. Since the dissolution of the USSR, Western political thought has viewed Central Asia not only as a resource-abundant region, particularly in terms of energy, but also as a pivotal hub for trans-Eurasian transportation and logistics. In this context, control over Central Asia and the key communication corridors traversing it has become essential in the twenty-first century for global actors seeking to strengthen their position within the broader Eurasian landscape.

Thus, this research aims to examine the ongoing dynamics in Central Asia that intensify geopolitical competition and conflicting interests, while also reassessing the strategic significance of transit routes and logistics, and evaluating their broader implications for the political, economic, and security landscape of Eurasia. This research is designed around the following key questions:

1. What impact does the competition among regional and international actors in Central Asia have on regional stability?

2. How is logistics diplomacy reshaping the foreign policy agenda of Central Asian states?
3. What role does logistics diplomacy play in the context of competition for influence between China and Russia?
4. How are transport and logistics projects transforming the foreign economic relations of Central Asian states?
5. How is logistics diplomacy perceived and used as an impact tool in the region?

Methodology: This research is based on quantitative and qualitative methodologies to ensure a multifaceted and comprehensive analysis. Among the qualitative methods, event study, comparative analysis, and content analysis played particularly important roles. First, the event study method was used for a detailed analysis of ongoing political and strategic processes in the region. This approach allowed for the analysis of cause-and-effect relationships within regional developments and the assessment of their impact on Central Asian states.

The comparative analysis method was used to analyze the dynamics of the Central Asian states' foreign policies since the collapse of the USSR. This method compared the political courses of these states, as well as the policies and influence of external actors, particularly Russia, the US, and China**,** in the region. Comparative analysis was applied to identify the similarities and differences in the strategies of external actors, as well as their potential impacts on the countries of the region. Special attention was given to content analysis, applied to Chinese President Xi Jinping's 2013 speech in Kazakhstan, which laid the ideological foundation for the BRI, and Russian President Vladimir Putin's 2015 address to the Federal Assembly, where the concept of the Greater Eurasian Partnership was introduced. A comparative analysis of these speeches was conducted to examine the differing approaches of China and Russia toward the integration and political framing of the Eurasian region.

Moreover, the comparative analysis method was applied to evaluate the opportunities for developing transport corridors in Central Asia. The research has investigated how such infrastructure projects affect the foreign policy decisions of countries in this region, with attention to both their outward engagement and their capacity for strategic self-determination.

Literature Review: Several academic works can be highlighted regarding various aspects of this topic, some of which have been used in this study. The application of Zbigniew Brzezinski's perspectives is of significant importance[1] for under-

[1] Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (Moscow: International Relations, 2003), in Russian: [Збигнев Бжезинский, *Великая шахматная*

standing different regional developments in Central Asia, including geo-economics and regional competition. Brzezinski's approaches allow for an analysis of the influence of international power centers on this strategic area.

In terms of studying regional issues, Vladimir Evseev's article can also be considered a valuable study,[2] where the relationship between Russia and Uzbekistan is analyzed, making a focus on the existing contradictions. This analysis provides an opportunity to assess the positioning of Russian policy in Central Asia.

Charles E. Ziegler's study[3] should also be mentioned. It focuses on the US strategy in Central Asia, particularly in the context of integration processes within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The author analyzes the regional interests of the US and their interaction with the policies of other major actors.

From the perspective of combining international competition and cooperation processes, the discussion of the BRI is also essential. Within the study of transportation communications and logistics issues, we have drawn upon the works of Srikant Kondapalli,[4] Kuralay Baizakova,[5] and Li Na.[6] These authors argue that the

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доска: американское превосходство и его геостратегические императивы (Москва: Международные отношения, 2003)].

[2] Vladimir Evseev, "On Contradictoriness of Russian-Uzbek Relationships in Military and Political Sphere," *World Economy and International Relations*, no. 6 (2013): 66–74, https://doi.org/10.20542/0131-2227-2013-6-66-74, in Russian: [Владимир Евсеев, "О противоречивости российско-узбекских отношений в военно-политической сфере", *Мировая экономика и международные отношения*, no. 6 (2013): 66–74].

[3] Charles E. Ziegler, "US Strategy in Central Asia and Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *World Economy and International Relations*, no. 4 (2005): 13–22, https://doi.org/10.20542/0131-2227-2005-4-13-22, in Russian: [Чарльз Э. Зиглер, "Стратегия США в Центральной Азии и Шанхайская организация сотрудничества", *Мировая экономика и международные отношения*, no. 4 (2005): 13–22].

[4] Srikanth Kondapalli, "Eurasian Transport Corridors – The Role of China," in *Logistics and Diplomacy. Collection of Materials from the VII International Seminar*, ed. K. I. Baizakova (Almaty: "Mir" Publishing House, 2024), 10–29, in Russian: [Srikanth Kondapalli, "Eurasian Transport Corridors – The Role of China," см.: *Логистика и дипломатия. Сборник материалов VII международного семинара*, отв. ред. К. И. Байзакова (Алматы: Издательский дом "Мир," 2024), 10–29].

[5] Kuralay Irtysovna Baizakova, "Transport and Logistics Issues in Foreign Policy in Kazakhstan," in *Logistics and Diplomacy. Collection of Materials from the VII International Seminar*, ed. K. I. Baizakova (Almaty: "Mir" Publishing House, 2024), 77–88, in Russian: [Куралай Иртысовна Байзакова, "Транспортно-логистические вопросы во внешней политике Казахстана", см.: *Логистика и дипломатия. Сборник материалов VII международного семинара*, отв. ред. К. И. Байзакова (Алматы: Издательский дом "Мир," 2024), 77–87].

[6] Na Li, ""One Belt, One Road" Initiative as a New Cooperation Model of the PRC with Russia and Central Asia Countries," *RUDN Journal of World History* 10, no. 4 (2018): 382–392, https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8127-2018-10-4-382-392 , in Russian: [На Ли, "Инициатива "Один пояс, один путь" как новая модель сотрудничества КНР с Россией и странами Центральной Азии", *Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Всеобщая история* 10, no. 4 (2018): 382–392].

transport routes passing through the region contribute to deepening economic cooperation and have a beneficial impact on regional integration.

Therefore, a thorough grasp of the international relations evolving in Central Asia can be formed by combining the ideas of the aforementioned authors, highlighting both cooperative and competitive trends.

Great Power Competition in Central Asia: Conflicting Interests and the Dynamics of Instability

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia appeared in an absolutely new geopolitical reality. Like other post-Soviet countries, Central Asian states faced many challenges, including security and political issues, which were of an intra-regional and extra-regional nature. These states, having proclaimed independence, needed to overcome too many difficulties related to the provision of security, the establishment of a full-fledged statehood, and, finally, becoming independent actors in the system of international relations. At the same time, a group of global and regional actors—the United States, Turkey, Iran, China, and, of course, Russia—started developing their policies towards the region of Central Asia. As a result, the area gradually transformed into a turmoil of geopolitical competition. Central Asian states, on their part, recognized the imperative of formulating independent foreign policy priorities based on national interests. The process by which these actors sought to gain more favorable economic and political positions in Central Asia took various forms, including economic diplomacy and cultural diplomacy. To better understand the policies of external actors in the region, we should examine them using a comparative analytical method.

According to the American political scholar Zbigniew Brzezinski, in the 1990s, Turkey perceived Central Asia as a region historically and culturally connected to it. The concept of uniting the Turkic nations of the Caspian Sea basin and Central Asia began to gain traction among Turkish nationalists, who saw it as a renewed opportunity for advancing Pan-Turkist aspirations.[7] In this context, the 2009 Nakhichevan Agreement between Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan,[8] the basis of the Organization of Turkic States opened up new opportunities to build political and economic relations between Central Asian states and Turkey. Azerbaijan was a bridge of connection, and the strategic importance of the South Caucasus in Turkey-Central Asia relations also increased.

[7] Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 161.

[8] "Nakhchivan Agreement on the Establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking States," *Organization of Turkic States*, accessed May 28, 2025, https://www.turkicstates.org/en/key-documents-section.

Zbigniew Brzezinski mentioned that the United States was also keen on intruding into this resource-rich area, previously under the Russian monopoly. The interest of the United States in the region was economic and geopolitical, including the establishment of new energy reserves and transit road systems.[9]

In this geopolitical competitive environment, most of the Central Asian nations were devoted to a policy of nurturing multisided and multi-dimensional ties with Russia, particularly through integration processes of the CIS in the initial years. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan signed the Collective Security Treaty (CST) on 15 May 1992. Later, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan continued to support the idea of a deeper integration within the CIS and also affiliated with the CSTO. The policies of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in the region were not similar. Turkmenistan's quite limited and neutral approach towards the CIS was directly conditioned by its strategy of acquiring permanent neutrality status in its foreign policy. This determination received its legal fixing on December 12, 1995, when the permanent neutrality of Turkmenistan was officially recognized by a United Nations General Assembly resolution, making it a unique case in the post-Soviet region as a subject of international law with neutral status. Turkmenistan's subsequent policy stemmed from its status as a permanently neutral state.

If Turkmenistan's foreign policy trajectory was explained by its status of permanent neutrality, Uzbekistan's foreign policy trajectory was entirely different; Uzbekistan did not prioritize the integration processes of the post-Soviet space under Russia's leadership. During Islam Karimov's presidency, Uzbekistan's relations with almost all external actors (Turkey, Russia, the US) were "periodically re-edited." In 1999, Uzbekistan did not renew the CST, which was a consequence of a passive position in relations with Russia. Some researchers attribute this to mistakes made by Russia in the mid-1990s, specifically Russia's refusal in 1997 to assist Uzbekistan with military equipment, as well as, in Tashkent's opinion, Russia's unfriendliness during the Batken events of 1999-2000.[10] Uzbekistan coupled this political line with developing relations with the US and Western power centers, one manifestation of which was its membership in GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Moldova) in 1999. One of the reasons for Uzbekistan's political position was also the threat coming from Afghanistan, which President I. Karimov also tried to neutralize via cooperation with the West. Affiliation to GUUAM also seemed to be another attempt to create a balance against Russia in the Central Asian region, but in essence, Uzbekistan did not show activity within

[9] Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 168.
[10] Evseev, "On Contradictoriness," 69.

this association; moreover, it showed caution in order not to get involved in anti-Russian political processes.

A new phase and a new competitive environment for external actors began for the states of Central Asia after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, when the United States strengthened its presence in the region, primarily in a military-political sense. This was evidenced by the fact that in early October 2001, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld visited Uzbekistan and signed an agreement. Under this agreement, approximately 1,500 American troops were stationed at the Karshi-Khanabad military air base in exchange for security guarantees. In December 2001, the US and Kyrgyzstan signed an agreement granting Americans the right to use Manas Airport. According to the agreement, Kyrgyzstan was to receive 7,000 USD for each American aircraft's takeoff and landing. The term of this agreement was extended for another three years in June 2003.[11]

The Government of Kazakhstan, in its turn, agreed to grant the US the right to conduct flights through its airspace and also allowed the transit of American cargo through its territory. In addition, Kazakhstan permitted the use of Almaty Airport in emergencies.[12] Similarly, Tajikistan granted the US armed forces the right to use Dushanbe Airport for refueling purposes.[13]

In addition, Russia continued to build up its military-political and economic positions in the region. From a security position, one of the very important steps took place on 25 May 2001 at the Yerevan session of the Collective Security Council of the CSTO, when a Decision on the Establishment of Collective Rapid Deployment Forces for the Central Asian Collective Security Region was adopted. These coalition forces had been formed[14] in August of the very year, which reinforced the multilateral military cooperation among Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. For the Central Asian states, the threats emanating from Afghanistan kept bilateral and multilateral cooperation relevant in the security sphere with Russia, in particular under the CSTO framework. Unlike Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, Uzbekistan was attempting to engage in security cooperation with the US. The US and Uzbekistan signed the "Declaration on Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework between the United States of America and the Republic of

[11] Ziegler, "US Strategy in Central Asia," 16.
[12] Ziegler, "US Strategy in Central Asia," 16.
[13] Ziegler, "US Strategy in Central Asia," 16.
[14] "The Collective Forces of the Rapid Deployment of the Central Asian Collective Security Region," *CSTO Joint Staff*, accessed May 18, 2025, https://jscsto.odkb-csto.org/en/voennaya-sostavlyauschaya-odkb/ksbrtsar.php.

Uzbekistan" on 12 March 2002, which also envisioned cooperation in the security aspect.[15]

Moreover, simultaneously, Uzbekistan was considering the possibility of withdrawal of its membership from GUUAM. That set alarm actually in the United States, and on June 15, 2002, the US Department of State press service made a statement that the administration of US President George Bush had hoped that the Government of Uzbekistan would reconsider its intention to withdraw from the GUUAM regional organization. The statement noted, "We also believe that membership in GUUAM will help strengthen Uzbekistan's role as a regional leader."[16] A few days after this statement, Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov, during a phone conversation with the Ukrainian Foreign Minister, declared that Uzbekistan did not intend to leave GUUAM, but merely suspended its participation in some of the GUUAM events, according to Kamilov.[17] Earlier, however, Kamilov had officially confirmed the decision to withdraw from GUUAM in an interview with RIA Novosti, emphasizing that Uzbekistan's participation in the GUUAM was dictated by the desire to integrate into the process of multilateral economic cooperation. However, according to him, no positive results were recorded within four years.[18] Consequently, no activity was shown by Uzbekistan within the GUUAM framework.

In May 2005, the President of Uzbekistan announced his country's withdrawal from GUUAM. According to a RIA Novosti report, in a letter to President Vladimir Voronin of Moldova, President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan noted the ineffectuality of his country's membership in the GUUAM stating: "Due to its geographical position, Uzbekistan sees no opportunities to realize its interests in the areas of economy and security within the framework of new initiatives and projects announced by GUUAM, and therefore withdraws from this organization."[19] Soon

[15] "Declaration on the Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework Between the United States of America and the Republic of Uzbekistan," *U.S. Department of State Archive*, July 8, 2002, accessed May 11, 2025, https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/2002/11711.htm.

[16] "The USA Expressed Hope That Uzbekistan Would Reconsider Its Decision to Withdraw from the GUUAM Organization," ["США выразили надежду, что Узбекистан пересмотрит свое решение о выходе из организации ГУУАМ"], *RIA Novosti*, June 26, 2002, accessed May 11, 2025, https://ria.ru/20020615/174829.html.

[17] "Uzbekistan Does /not Intend to Leave the Regional Organization GUUAM, Which Also Unites Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova," ["Узбекистан не намерен выходить из региональной организации ГУУАМ, объединяющей также Грузию, Украину, Азербайджан и Молдавию"], *RIA Novosti*, June 26, 2002, accessed May 11, 2025, https://ria.ru/20020626/181304.html.

[18] RIA Novosti, "Uzbekistan Does Not Intend to Leave the Regional Organization GUUAM."

[19] "Moscow Knows Uzbekistan's Withdrawal from GUUAM," ["В Москве известно о выходе Узбекистана из ГУУАМ,"], *RIA Novosti*, May 6, 2005, accessed May 29, 2025, https://ria.ru/20050506/39940517.html.

after, relations between Uzbekistan and the West deteriorated in connection with the Andijan events in May 2005.

In July 2005, Uzbekistan demanded that the US troops leave its military base in the period of six months. This demand came after the US sharply criticized the Uzbek government's actions in suppressing the unrest in the Andijan region.[20] The US and other Western countries immediately demanded an independent investigation of the Andijan events and accused Tashkent of "indiscriminate and unjustified use of force." Uzbekistan's leadership perceived this as interference in the country's internal affairs.[21] Later, the West further toughened its policy towards Uzbekistan on this issue. In particular, the European Union imposed sanctions on arms trade against Uzbekistan, temporarily suspended the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, and restricted the entry of Uzbek politicians into EU territory.[22]

In his attempt to explain the West's stand in favor of monitoring investigations into the May 13, 2005 events in Andijan, Yuri Lebedev, an advisor to the Embassy of Russia in Uzbekistan, having met on-site with a working group composed of members of the diplomatic corps accredited in Uzbekistan, in Andijan on July 11 of the same year, stated that "the main goal of the forces behind the Andijan events was to destabilize the situation in the Central Asian region."[23] The sharp difference in these statements almost clearly reflected the growing competition between major players—the West and Russia—in Central Asia. In the geopolitics of the region, therefore, the accession of Uzbekistan into the CSTO in 2006 could be viewed as a movement to strengthen the positions of Moscow.

Despite being a member of the CSTO, Uzbekistan was by no means actively engaged in the military-political sphere. President Karimov would portray the image of a reservist and would occasionally take an obstructive position, especially as important decisions were being adopted. This obstructed the development of unified approaches within the CSTO. This attitude became particularly evident between 2009–2011, when a number of fundamental documents vital for enhancing the CSTO's effectiveness were adopted within the organization. It was obvious that Uzbekistan did not see the solution to its security problems within the CSTO framework. Finally, in 2012, Uzbekistan withdrew from the CSTO. However, this step did not mean a radical strategic reorientation towards the West, unlike the po-

[20] "The US Air Force Will Leave Uzbekistan Ahead of Schedule," ["ВВС США досрочно покинут Узбекистан"], *RBC*, September 27, 2005, accessed May 29, 2025, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/27/09/2005/5703bb3f9a7947afa08c8994.
[21] Evseev, "On Contradictoriness," 70.
[22] Evseev, "On Contradictoriness," 70.
[23] "The Goal of the Andijan Terrorists Is to Destabilize the Situation in the Region," ["Цель андижанских террористов — дестабилизация ситуации в регионе"], *RBC*, July 14, 2005, accessed May 11, 2025, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/14/07/2005/5703bb029a7947afa08c840c.

litical shift of the late 1990s. Uzbekistan's membership in the CSTO from 2006–2012 can be observed as a response to the political pressure exerted by the West after the Andijan events. Subsequently, Uzbekistan reverted to its traditional foreign policy model, avoiding long-term involvement within any alliance.

The Tulip Revolution of 2005 in Kyrgyzstan was also a consequence of the Western influence in Central Asia. It seemed to be a logical continuation of the post-Soviet "color revolutions" (the Rose Revolution in Georgia, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine). As a result, Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev first fled to Moscow and then signed his resignation at the Kyrgyz embassy in Moscow on April 4, 2005. For the first time in one of the Central Asian states, a change of power occurred through a revolution, regarding which different assessments are made about the influence of external factors.[24] It was evident that a shift in the balance of power established in the post-Soviet region in the 1990s was taking place, and the color revolutions were part of it. However, on the other hand, researchers also pointed to several internal factors that caused the Tulip Revolution of Kyrgyzstan.[25] In the context of these developments, Russia sought not only to maintain its influence within the post-Soviet space but also to revise the international order established after the Cold War on a global scale. One of the key indicators of this trend was President Vladimir Putin's well-known speech delivered in Munich on February 10, 2007, which has been widely interpreted as a manifestation of Moscow's growing dissatisfaction and its demand for a reconfiguration of the global order.[26]

After the Tulip Revolution, no sharp turns towards the West were observed in Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy, as happened in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine. Kyrgyzstan continued to remain in the CSTO and develop relations with Russia at a bilateral level. Moreover, in 2009, the Kyrgyz authorities announced that the Manas facility would cease to operate as a military base and would be transformed into a transit center for the US Air Force. In 2014, it was finally closed, which researchers linked to the freezing of relations between the US and Russia after the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis.[27]

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[24] "There Were Stones, There Were Horses: Who Was Behind the 'Tulip Revolution' in Kyrgyzstan and How It Led the Country to New Crises," ["Были камни, были кони": Кто стоял за 'тюльпановой революцией' в Киргизии и как она привела страну к новым кризисам"], *Lenta.ru*, April 19, 2023, accessed May 11, 2025, https://lenta.ru/articles/2023/04/19/kirgizia/

[25] "Tulip Revolution: A Look at the March Events 17 Years Later," ["Тюльпановая революция: взгляд на мартовские события спустя 17 лет"], *Radio Azattyk*, March 24, 2022, accessed May 11, 2025, https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31768025.html.

[26] "Speech and Discussion at the Munich Security Policy Conference," ["Выступление и дискуссия на Мюнхенской конференции по вопросам политики безопасности"], video, *Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia*, February 10, 2007, accessed May 29, 2025, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034/videos.

[27] "There Were Stones, There Were Horses: Who Was Behind the 'Tulip Revolution' in Kyrgyzstan and How It Led the Country to New Crises," [""Были камни, были кони:" Кто стоял за

Meanwhile, it was clear in the Russian policy that it handled the internal political development of the Central Asian states cautiously. This was evident, for instance, during the events of 2010 in Kyrgyzstan, particularly after June 10, when renewed violence in the south of the country triggered inter-ethnic clashes. On 12 June, the Russian news outlets reported, interim President and government head of Kyrgyzstan, Roza Otunbayeva, appealed to the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to deploy Russian peacekeeping forces in Kyrgyzstan. On 12 June, the Russian president directed the Russian Health and Social Development Minister and the Minister of Emergency Situations to provide humanitarian aid to Kyrgyzstan. As the chairman of the CSTO Collective Security Council, he also instructed the secretaries of the security councils of the member states to hold consultations on developing collective response measures. President Medvedev also held a series of consultations with President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan and CSTO Secretary-General Nikolay Bordyuzha. At the same time, official Moscow announced that it did not intend to send peacekeepers to Kyrgyzstan.[28]

Nevertheless, Russia continued to maintain its military presence in Kyrgyzstan, which speaks to Russia's strengthening positions and military presence in the region. Moreover, according to 2022 data, Russia was equipping its military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with new equipment.[29] The presence of these military bases once again underscores Russia's role in the Central Asian region, primarily in military-political terms. The competition between the main actors in international relations in Central Asia became particularly obvious after the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan. This occurred after the Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev appealed to the CSTO for assistance on January 5. On January 6, 2022, US State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters that the US State Department hoped to receive a rational response from the Kazakh authorities regarding what necessitated the introduction of a CSTO peacekeeping contingent into the country, following reports of external forces interfering in the events. The attention of the EU and China was also focused on the developments in Kazakhstan.

'тюльпановой революцией' в Киргизии и как она привела страну к новым кризисам"], *Lenta.ru*, April 19, 2023, accessed May 11, 2025, https://lenta.ru/articles/2023/04/19/kirgizia/.

[28] Zhak Manukyan, "Collective Security Treaty Organization Peacekeeping Specifics (2004–2010)," *Bulletin of Yerevan University: International Relations and Political Sciences* 13, no. 3 (39) (2022): 22, https://doi.org/10.46991/BYSU:D/2022.13.3.017, in Armenian: [Ժակ Մանուկյան, "ՀԱՊԿ խաղաղապահ գործունեության առանձնահատկությունները (2004–2010 թթ.)," *Բանբեր Երևանի Համալսարանի. Միջազգային հարաբերություններ, Քաղաքագիտություն* 13, թիվ 3 (39) (2022): 22].

[29] "Russian Military Bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan Will Be Reinforced with New Weapons and Equipment," *["Военные базы РФ в Таджикистане и Киргизии усилят новым вооружением и техникой"*], *Interfax*, January 24, 2022, accessed May 11, 2025, https://www.interfax.ru/world/817988.

On February 16, 2022, the CSTO peacekeeping operation in Kazakhstan became a subject of discussion at a UN Security Council meeting on the topic of cooperation between the UN and the CSTO. These discussions at the UN Security Council once again revealed the competition among the main actors in international relations, particularly the confrontation between Russia and the NATO member states led by the US in the Central Asian region.[30]

In the summer of 2022, the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, an autonomous administrative unit within Uzbekistan, became the center of instability in Central Asia. Mass protests began there on July 1, 2022, as a result of a draft of amendments to the Constitution of Uzbekistan, which envisioned abolishing the autonomous status of the Republic of Karakalpakstan. The largest demonstration took place in Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan.

Given the circumstances of mass protests, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan arrived in Nukus, where he made a statement promising not to amend the articles of the Constitution related to the autonomous republic's status, except Article 73, which defines the inviolability of Karakalpakstan's territorial integrity. At the same time, the president announced the imposition of a state of emergency in the autonomous region from July 3 to August 2.[31] The Uzbek authorities saw foreign interference in these events, as stated by President Mirziyoyev during a video conference on July 6, 2022, specifically noting, "Of course, these events were not organized in one day or ten days. These actions were prepared for years by foreign forces. Their main goal is to encroach on the territorial integrity of Uzbekistan and create an inter-ethnic conflict."[32]

The unresolved border issues between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan also negatively impacted the stability of the region. Specifically, from January 2022, border tensions between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan escalated into military clashes in September of the same year, which were unprecedented in scale compared to previous

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[30] Zhak Manukyan, "Peacekeeping as One of the Priorities of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (2011–2022)," *Bulletin of Yerevan University: International Relations and Political Sciences* 14, no. 2 (41) (2023): 31, https://doi.org/10.46991/BYSU:D/2023.14.2.022, in Russian: [Жак Манукян, "Миротворческая деятельность как один из приоритетов Организации Договора о коллективной безопасности (2011–2022 гг.)," *Вестник Ереванского Университета: Международные отношения, Политология* 14, № 2 (41) (2023): 31].

[31] "Attempt to Deprive Karakalpakstan of Autonomy: What Is Behind It? ," ["Попытка лишить Каракалпакстан автономии: что за этим стоит?"], *Deutsche Welle*, July 4, 2022, accessed May 11, 2025, https://www.dw.com/ru/popytka-lishit-karakalpakstan-avtonomii-chto-za-jetim-stoit/a-62357771.

[32] "Shavkat Mirziyoyev: Foreign Forces Were Behind the Unrest in Nukus," ["Шавкат Мирзиёев: за беспорядками в Нукусе стояли иностранные силы"], *Sputnik Uzbekistan*, July 6, 2022, accessed May 11, 2025, https://uz.sputniknews.ru/20220706/shavkat-mirziyoev-za-besporyadkami-v-nukuse-stoyali-inostrannye-sily-25955347.html.

border clashes between these two countries since the collapse of the USSR.[33] However, the parties were able to put an end to military actions. Sadyr Japarov and Emomali Rahmon, the presidents of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, signed a treaty on the state border between the two countries on March 13, 2025. Two checkpoints on the Tajik-Kyrgyz border, which were closed in 2021, are now open again.[34] From March 14, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan resumed air transportation, which had been suspended since May 2021.[35] The signing of this agreement between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan was important for ensuring stability in the region and for the implementation of several regional logistics projects.

How Transport and Logistics Diplomacy Reshapes the Foreign Policies of Central Asian States

The states of Central Asia, which formed the periphery of the Soviet Union, possess diverse opportunities for economic development, determined by both the availability of internal resources and the economic policies implemented. The global economic crisis that began in 2008 affected the countries of the region differently.[36] These differences were conditioned not only by their domestic economic policies but also directly by their economic relations with Russia and China. Therefore, it was not possible to completely avoid the negative consequences of the crisis.

By 2009, the impact of the economic crisis was already being felt in the countries of Central Asia.[37] For example, the economy of Uzbekistan, which was less integrated into the global economy compared to Kazakhstan, began to decline due to a decrease in demand in the global market for a number of goods exported from Uzbekistan, particularly the prices of precious and non-ferrous metals, cotton, ura-

[33] "Media Reported the Death of Two Tajik Soldiers in a Shootout on the Border with Kyrgyzstan," ["СМИ сообщили о гибели двух таджикских солдат в перестрелке на границе с Киргизией"], *Interfax*, September 14, 2022, accessed May 11, 2025, https://www.interfax.ru/amp/862125.

[34] "Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan Signed a Border Treaty," ["Кыргызстан и Таджикистан подписали договор о границе"], *Gazeta.uz*, March 13, 2025, accessed May 11, 2025, https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2025/03/13/border/.

[35] "Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan Resume Air Traffic: First Flight from Dushanbe to Bishkek in Four Years," ["Таджикистан и Кыргызстан возобновили авиасообщение: в Бишкек прилетел первый за четыре года рейс из Душанбе"]," *Radio Ozodi*, March 14, 2025, accessed May 11, 2025, https://rus.ozodi.org/a/33347470.html.

[36] "IMF Survey: IMF to Step Up Its Engagement, Support in Central Asia," *International Monetary Fund*, June 22, 2009, accessed May 11, 2025, https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2015/09/28/04/53/socar062209a.

[37] "Global Economic Crisis Led to Severe Humanitarian Consequences in Europe and Central Asia," ["Глобальный экономический кризис привел к тяжелым гуманитарным последствиям в Европе и Центральной Азии"] *United Nations News*, October 19, 2009, accessed May 12, 2025, https://news.un.org/ru/story/2009/10/1153261.

nium, oil products, mineral fertilizers, and other raw materials. This, in turn, led to a decrease in the income of both exporting economic entities and investors, as well as a decline in production profitability. As a result, these processes negatively affected economic growth rates and macroeconomic indicators.[38]

In these circumstances, China's initiative to establish a land route connection with Europe through the territory of the region gained strategic importance for the Central Asian states. On September 7, 2013, President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping delivered a historic speech at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan, introducing the BRI**.**[39] In his speech, the Chinese leader presented the main principles of China's policy in Central Asia, emphasizing that the initiative would not pursue a goal of a competitive positioning, but was about the deepening of cooperation. Xi Jinping considered the alignment of external and internal forces, as well as the overlapping of interests in the region, speaking about the initiative. The Chinese President particularly emphasized the need for policy coordination with Russia, focusing on the priority of bilateral cooperation:

> "We respect the path of development, the foreign and domestic policy that the peoples of other countries have independently chosen. We absolutely do not interfere in the internal affairs of the Middle Asian countries, do not seek leadership in resolving regional issues, and do not create spheres of influence for ourselves. We are ready to intensify exchanges and coordination with Russia and the countries of Middle Asia and jointly make unremitting efforts to create a harmonious region."[40]

According to Xi Jinping, the essence and content of strategic cooperation between China and the Central Asian states lie in the mutual support of each other's state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political stability. By subordinating competitive approaches and replacing them with a cooperative model, China proposed deepening bilateral relations with both individual states and within the framework of the SCO**.** In this context, an essential direction was considered the joint fight

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[38] "Global Financial and Economic Crisis, Ways and Measures to Overcome It in the Conditions of Uzbekistan," ["Мировой финансово-экономический кризис, пути и меры по его преодолению в условиях Узбекистана"], *Embassy of Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan*, March 2009, accessed May 12, 2025, https://www.uzembassy.kz/ru/page/mirovoy-finansovo-ekonomicheskiy-krizis-puti-i-mery-po-ego-preodoleniyu-v-usloviyah-uzbekistana.

[39] Anna A. Kireeva, "Belt and Road Initiative: Overview, Objectives and Implications," *Comparative Politics Russia* 9, no. 3 (2018): 61, https://doi.org/10.18611/2221-3279-2018-9-3-61-74. [Анна Андреевна Киреева, "Инициатива пояса и пути:" содержание, цели и значение, *Сравнительная политика* 9, № 3 (2018): 61, https://doi.org/10.18611/2221-3279-2018-9-3-61-74].

[40] Xi Jinping, *On Public Administration*, 2nd ed. (Beijing: Foreign Language Literature Publishing House, 2017), 389, in Russian: [Си Цзиньпин, *О государственном управлении*, 2-е изд. (Пекин: Издательство литературы на иностранных языках, 2017), 389].

against the "three forces of evil"—terrorism, separatism, and extremism—as well as against illegal drug trafficking and transnational organized crime. In the context of deepening economic integration, Xi Jinping proposed the joint creation of the New Silk Road Economic Belt, aimed at promoting economic cooperation among the countries of the region. For the implementation of this strategic initiative, five main complementary steps were proposed:

First, it was deemed necessary to promote mutual recognition of each country's political positions. This provision implied that the countries of the region should exchange information on economic development strategies. At the same time, it was important to respect national characteristics and differences, developing harmonized programs that would pave the way for the implementation of regional economic integration.[41]

Second, it was considered necessary to develop road communication. Xi Jinping recalled that the SCO was conducting negotiations on signing an agreement on simplifying transport formalities. Therefore, in his opinion, it was necessary to sign and implement this document as soon as possible, which would allow for the formation of a large-scale transport corridor in the "Pacific Ocean–Baltic Sea" direction. The Chinese leader noted that on this basis, they are ready to actively discuss issues of improving cross-border transport infrastructure with all interested parties, gradually forming a transport network connecting East Asia, West Asia, and South Asia.[42]

Third, it was necessary to ensure unimpeded trade. The Chinese leader noted that the Silk Road Economic Belt is home to approximately 3 billion people. He also emphasized that the scale and potential of the regional market are unique.

Fourth, Xi Jinping considered it necessary to strengthen the monetary circulation sector. In his speech, he recalled that China, Russia, and other countries have developed positive cooperation within the framework of national currencies and have achieved encouraging results and accumulated valuable experience.

Fifth, the Chinese leader considered it necessary to promote mutual recognition of peoples' aspirations, as, to his mind, relations between countries are largely determined by the rapprochement of peoples.[43]

Therefore, China offered the states of the region an economic cooperation project that balances the interests of Russia and China in the region, also emphasizing the cooperation achieved within the SCO. This initiative by the Chinese leader promoted the idea of cooperation as a path to development in a civilizational di-

[41] Xi Jinping, *On Public Administration*, 391.
[42] Xi Jinping, *On Public Administration*, 391.
[43] Xi Jinping, *On Public Administration*, 392.

mension, in some ways contrasting it with competition and the concept of the clash of civilizations.

This economic cooperation was an additional opportunity for the Central Asian states to diversify their foreign policy, which, as mentioned above, Uzbekistan sought to achieve. Kazakhstan also had such a political course, having already taken steps to reduce its dependence on Russia in the field of energy exports.[44]

Two months after the speech of Xi Jinping, on November 7, 2013, as part of the II International Transport and Logistics Business Forum "New Silk Road" in Astana, the leaders of JSC "National Company "Kazakhstan Temir Zholy," CJSC "Azerbaijan Railways," and JSC "Georgian Railway" signed an agreement on the establishment of a Coordination Committee for the development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR).[45]

In February 2014, the Coordination Committee for the Development of the TITR was established to increase the flow of goods along the TITR.[46] This road would stretch from China to Europe and would play an important role in the geopolitics of Central Asia, making it a transport route with a certain role in China-Europe trade and economic relations, and taken separately, it could turn Kazakhstan into an important transport and logistics hub in the Eurasian region as a whole. In parallel with these processes, Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan signed the Treaty of the EAEU (2014). Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined later. As a result, two Central Asian states became participants in a new integration process in the post-Soviet space. The creation of the EAEU also somewhat changed the political and economic image of the region.

By promoting integration within the EAEU, Russia also considered China's growing role in the region and the initiatives China had put forward in the Eurasian region. President Putin articulated this in his annual address to the Federal Assembly on December 3, 2015, where he emphasized: "We have reached the next level of cooperation within the Eurasian Economic Union by creating a common space, with free movement of capital, goods, and labor. We have reached a basic agree-

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[44] Zhak S. Manukyan, "Oil Diplomacy of Azerbaijan and Security Problems of the Republic of Armenia," in *Axis of World Politics of the XXI Century: Increasing the Struggle for Resources in Asia and Africa*, ed. A. M. Khazanova (Moscow: Center for Strategic Conjunctures, Institute of Eastern Studies RAS, 2012), 270, in Russian: [Жак Самвелович Манукян, "Нефтяная дипломатия Азербайджана и проблемы безопасности Республики Армения," см.: *Ось мировой политики XXI в.: Обострение борьбы за ресурсы в Азии и Африке*, под ред. А. М. Хазановой (Москва: Центр стратегической конъюнктуры, Институт востоковедения РАН, 2012), 270].

[45] The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), also known as the Middle Corridor, has gained strategic importance in recent years. In this paper, the term Middle Corridor will be used interchangeably with TITR.

[46] "Trans-Caspian International Transport Route: History," accessed May 13, 2025, https://middlecorridor.com/en/about-the-association/history-en.

ment on combining Eurasian integration with the Chinese Silk Road Economic Belt."[47] This implied that Russia preferred collaboration over rivalry in Eurasia. In this context, Putin proposed the idea of a Eurasian partnership in his address, specifically stating:

> "I propose holding consultations, in conjunction with our colleagues from the Eurasian Economic Union, with the SCO and the ASEAN members, as well as with the states that are about to join the SCO, with the view of potentially forming an economic partnership. Together, our states make up nearly a third of the global economy in terms of purchasing power parity. Such a partnership could initially focus on protecting investments, streamlining procedures for the cross-border movement of goods, joint development of technical standards for next-generation technology products, and the mutual provision of access to markets for both services and capital. Of course, this partnership should be based on principles of equality and mutual interest."[48]

It is evident from comparing the key points of Xi Jinping's speech on September 7, 2013, and Vladimir Putin's speech on December 3, 2015, that the concepts presented are compatible and share similar values. Chinese and Russian officials place a strong emphasis on expanding logistical hubs, updating transportation infrastructure, and strengthening the SCO cooperation.

Integration within the EAEU framework differs considerably from the integration processes in the post-Soviet space, since here integration is carried out within the framework of an organization endowed with supranational powers, in which Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which are part of the EAEU common market, participate. Some researchers even believed that this organization could be an opportunity to ease tensions between the EU and Russia through EU-EAEU cooperation.[49] In this case, the EAEU could be a serious global player on the Eurasian continent, taking into consideration the idea of Eurasian cooperation put forward by the Russian President. In the policies of both Russia and China, an important fact was that the leaders of the two states sought not to oppose each other on regional issues. In

[47] "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," *Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia*, December 3, 2015, accessed May 11, 2025, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50864.
[48] "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia.
[49] Tigran Yepremyan, "Armenia Within the Complex of "Overlapping Authority and Multiple Loyalty": Security Challenges," in *The European Union and The Eastern Partnership: Security Challenges*. Ed. Vasile Cucerescu, Carlos E. Pacheco Amaral, Ioan Horga [et al.]. Supplement to *Eurolimes Journal*, 2018, 234.

this context, according to researchers, the projects of the New Silk Road Economic Belt and the EAEU are characterized by an asymmetric nature.[50]

In 2015, the main routes of the New Silk Road Economic Belt were outlined: from China through Central Asia and Russia to Europe; from China through Central Asia and West Asia to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea; and from China to Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean[51]. The Maritime Silk Road was formulated as two main routes: from Chinese seaports through the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean and then to Europe and Africa, and from Chinese ports through the South China Sea to the Pacific Ocean.[52]

In accordance with the New Silk Road project, Kazakhstan has actively been implementing its transport and logistics policy. In December 2016, the participants of the Coordinating Committee for the Development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route -Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia -decided to establish the International Association of the TITR. Since February 2017, the TITR has started its activities.[53]

In 2017, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway was also completed, the construction of which lasted about 10 years. The operation of the BTK railway further increased the strategic opportunities of the TITR, thanks to which the TITR had two important routes: the first is the Trans-Kazakhstan railway, and the second is the BTK railway.[54] The development of the Middle Corridor is institutionally independent and potentially transformative for the economies of Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Turkey.[55]

Uzbekistan's interest in the operational prospects of the BTK railway has been evident as well. In December 2017, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev approved a program to diversify international cargo transport routes from 2018 to 2022. According to this document, the transit cargo transportation via the BTK railway line was planned to begin as early as 2018.[56]

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[50] Li ""One Belt, One Road" Initiative," 388.
[51] Kireeva, "Belt and Road Initiative," 62.
[52] Kireeva, "Belt and Road Initiative," 62.
[53] "Trans-Caspian International Transport Route: History," accessed May 13, 2025, https://middlecorridor.com/en/about-the-association/history-en.
[54] Baizakova, "Transport and Logistics Issues," 80.
[55] Tristan Kenderdine and Peter Bucsky, *Middle Corridor—Policy Development and Trade Potential of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route*, ADBI Working Paper 1268 (Tokyo: Asian Development Bank Institute, 2021), accessed May 12, 2025, https://www.adb.org/publications/middle-corridor-policy-development-trade-potential.
[56] "Cargo transportation to Georgia has begun via a multimodal corridor through Uzbekistan," ["По мультимодальному коридору через Узбекистан начаты грузовые перевозки в Грузию"], *Review.uz*, January 28, 2020, accessed May 12, 2025, https://review.uz/post/po-multimodalnomu-koridoru-cerez-uzbekistan-nacaty-gruzovye-perevozki-v-gruziu.

Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan also expressed interest in the cargo transportation via the BTK railway. On December 19-20, 2019, a meeting was held in Tashkent to develop an international multimodal route, with the participation of the heads of railway companies from Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The Ministry of Transport of Uzbekistan also participated, which highlighted the importance of Uzbekistan on this transport route. This meeting, organized at the initiative of the Uzbekistani side, discussed the priority issues of increasing cargo volumes and developing multimodal land transport through the territories of the participating countries. During the discussion, unified transit tariff rates and conditions for cargo transportation along the route were approved. The participants agreed to create a Coordination Committee consisting of the heads of the railway companies of the participating countries, under the chairmanship of the Ministry of Transport of Uzbekistan.[57]

As of March 2021, approximately 45 containers had been sent from Uzbekistan towards Turkey and Europe via the BTK railway line.[58] Uzbekistan continued to show consistent activity in this direction. Notably, on August 2, 2022, the first joint meeting of the Foreign Ministers and Ministers of Economy, Trade, and Transport of Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Turkey took place in Tashkent. Acting Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan Vladimir Norov, summarizing the meeting's results, told journalists that the authorities of Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Turkey expressed their readiness to actively use the BTK railway as part of deepening cooperation among the Turkic states.[59] Thus, it becomes obvious how transport and logistics diplomacy contributes to the development of relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan on one side, and Turkey and the Central Asian states on the other. Despite this political activism from the aforementioned states, the freight transportation figures along the BTK railway route remained quite modest. According to expert assessments, freight volumes on the BTK railway line continued to be at an extremely low level until 2023. For example, in 2022 (the latest data before the reconstruction started in 2023), only 690,000 tons of cargo were transported via the

[57] "Uzbekistan Plans to Launch Transit Trains to Azerbaijan and Georgia by Spring 2020," ["Узбекистан планируют к весне 2020 года запустить транзитные поезда в Азербайджан и Грузию"], *Review.uz*, December 21, 2019, accessed May 12, 2025, https://review.uz/news/sentral-asia/uzbekistan-planiruyut-k-vesne-2020-goda-zapustit-tranzitniye-poezda-v-azerbaydjan-i-gruziyu.

[58] "Cargo from Uzbekistan to Europe Goes through Georgia," ["Грузы из Узбекистана в Европу едут через территорию Грузии"], *Sputnik Georgia*, March 3, 2021, accessed May 29, 2025, https://sputnik-georgia.ru/20210304/Gruzy-iz-Uzbekistana-v-Evropy-edut-cherez-territoriyu-Gruzii-251074513.html.

[59] "Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Türkiye Are Ready to Actively Use the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway," ["Узбекистан, Азербайджан и Турция готовы активно использовать ж/д Баку–Тбилиси–Карс"], *Sputnik Georgia*, August 2, 2022, accessed May 29, 2025, https://sputnik-georgia.ru/20220802/269133926.html.

BTK line. According to experts, the main reason for the less active operation of the BTK railway was the 'bottlenecks' in Georgia. Specifically, the underdeveloped infrastructure in the Marabda-Turkish border section led to congestion and slow cargo movement. To solve this problem, reconstruction work was carried out in that section, for which the Azerbaijani government allocated 100 million US dollars.[60] Thus, it becomes clear how transport and logistics diplomacy contributes to the deepening of relations between Turkey and the Central Asian states. Despite such political activity of these states, the indicators of cargo transportation along the BTK railway route were quite modest; according to experts, until 2023, the volumes of cargo transportation along the BTK railway line will continue to remain at an extremely low level. The main goal of modernizing the BTK railway line was to increase the competitiveness of the Middle Corridor and make the BTK railway one of its main cargo arteries. As a result of the expansion, the BTK's annual capacity increased from 1 million tons to 5 million tons.[61] However, a significant obstacle arose in this context: the COVID-19 pandemic, which adversely affected the transport and logistics policies of Central Asian states.

The significance of the BTK railway in the process of delivering goods from China and Central Asian states to Europe by land increased Azerbaijan's role not only from an economic and logistical standpoint but also made it a crucial transport route, especially after Russia launched its special military operations in Ukraine. In terms of developing transport routes in the South Caucasus and increasing the transit potential of the region, Armenia took an important initiative by putting forward the "Crossroad of Peace" project, which Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia presented on October 26, 2023, during the "Silk Road" international conference held in Tbilisi.[62] The implementation of this project would also contribute to the establishment of stable peace in the South Caucasus. However, it has not received a positive response from Azerbaijan. Moreover, on January 28, 2025, during a consultation dedicated to the discussion of transport issues, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev stated about this project: "This so-called project is not worth two cents without Azerbaijan, and we have repeatedly conveyed this to the Arme-

[60] "Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Becomes the Most Important Link of the Middle Corridor," ["Баку–Тбилиси–Карс становится важнейшим звеном Среднего коридора"], *Sputnik Georgia*, April 21, 2024, accessed May 29, 2025, https://sputnik-georgia.ru/20240421/287461956.html.

[61] "Modernization Work on the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway Line Has Been Completed," ["Завершены работы по модернизации железнодорожной линии Баку–Тбилиси–Карс"], *Azertag*, May 3, 2024, accessed May 29, 2025, https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/zaversheny_raboty_po_modernizacii_-zheleznodorozhnoi_linii_baku_tbilisi_kars-2985445.

[62] "Prime Minister Pashinyan Presents the "Crossroads of Peace" Project and Its Principles at the Tbilisi International Forum," *Official Website of the Prime Minister of Armenia*, October 26, 2023, accessed May 29, 2025, https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2023/10/26/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/.

nian side through various channels. If you truly want to implement this project, first of all, you should approach Azerbaijan."[63]

The importance of the BTK railway also grew after Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey signed a new agreement on November 15, 2017, regarding the launch of the Lapis Lazuli Transit Corridor during a five-sided meeting held in Ashgabat on November 15, within the framework of the seventh session of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA).[64] This regional corridor starts from Herat province in Afghanistan and continues to the Turkmenbashi port in Turkmenistan, from where goods are transported by ferries to Baku, and then via the BTK railway to Europe.[65] On January 16, 2021, the heads of the interdepartmental working groups of Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Afghanistan reached an agreement on a trilateral roadmap for deepened cooperation regarding the "Lapis Lazuli" corridor.[66] The participating states of the Lapis Lazuli corridor consistently keep the development of transport and logistics opportunities in focus, discussing it in bilateral and multilateral formats. The Ashgabat negotiations of February 26, 2024, between representatives of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan state about this.[67] In October 2024, during a working visit to Turkey, Azerbaijan's Minister of Digital Development and Transport, Rashad Nabiyev, met with Afghanistan's Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation, Hamidullah Akhundzada. During the meeting, the opportunities for bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the transport sector were discussed, particularly within the framework of the Lapis Lazuli international transport route.[68]

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[63] "Meeting Dedicated to Transportation Issues Was Held – President Ilham Aliyev Addressed the Meeting," Azertag, January 28, 2025, accessed May 29, 2025, https://azertag.az/en/xeber/meeting_dedicated_to_transportation_issues_was_held__president_ilham_aliyev_addressed_the_meeting_video-3392171.

[64] Fuad Shahbazov, "Lapis Lazuli: A New Transit Corridor to Link Asia and Europe via the South Caucasus," *The Jamestown Foundation*, November 30, 2017, accessed May 29, 2025, https://jamestown.org/program/lapis-lazuli-new-transit-corridor-link-asia-europe-via-south-caucasus/.

[65] Kondapalli, "Eurasian Transport Corridors," 16.

[66] Naghi Ahmadov, "Azerbaijan, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan Sign Trilateral Roadmap for Cooperation on Eurasian Connectivity," *The Jamestown Foundation*, February 10, 2021, accessed May 30, 2025, https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-afghanistan-and-turkmenistan-sign-trilateral-roadmap-for-cooperation-on-eurasian-connectivity/.

[67] "Ashgabat Will Host a Meeting of Representatives of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor Member Countries," ["Ашхабад примет встречу представителей стран-участниц Лазуритового коридора"], *Business Turkmenistan*, February 28, 2024, accessed May 30, 2025, https://business.com.tm/ru/post/11473/ashhabad-primet-vstrechu-predstavitelei-stranuchastnic-lazuritovogo-koriydora.

[68] "Azerbaijan and Afghanistan Discussed Cooperation Opportunities Within the Lapis Lazuli Route," ["Азербайджан и Афганистан обсудили возможности сотрудничества в рамках маршрута Лапис Лазули"], *Azertag*, October 4, 2024, accessed May 30, 2025, https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/azerbaidzhan_i_afganistan_obsudili_vozmozhnosti_sotrudnichestva_v_ramkah_marshuta_lapis_lazuli__obnovleno-3213882.

An alternative to the Lapis Lazuli corridor could be the Iran-Afghanistan Khaf-Herat railway, which is scheduled to be operational by 2026, but we believe that Ankara and Baku will try to downplay the importance of this railway, since the operation of such communications also contributes to the weakening of Iran's political influence. This eighteen-year-old project connects the city of Herat to the Iranian railway network through the city of Khaf, located in Razavi Khorasan Province. This line is considered an important link in a wider transnational corridor connecting China, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and eventually the Persian Gulf and Europe.[69]

In general, the development of transit routes in the Central Asian region has faced some challenges, particularly those of the economic resources and investment strategies of the TITR member states, as the question revolves around the capacity of railways and seaports.[70] It will become easier to overcome these challenges by enhancing the transit capacity of the TITR member states. In 2024, Kazakhstan started the modernization of the Aktau port, which is a central part of the TITR. Given that expanding the port's capacity will naturally promote growth in transit cargo transport and enhance Kazakhstan's role along the route, the modernization of the Aktau Port is of strategic importance. This is particularly true due to its inclusion in the key North–South transport corridor connecting Russia and India via Iran.[71]

Because the TITR cargo shipping goes through Azerbaijan and Georgia, the Georgian government started restoring and modernizing the country's logistics infrastructure. For instance, in 2024, Georgia initiated the construction of the Anaklia port, which is to further cement Georgia's position in the TITR system. Anaklia's deep-water port is planned to be opened in 2029. During the first phase of the project, the transit capacity of the port will be 600,000 containers per year. According to Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze of Georgia, "the development of the Anaklia project is one of the country's priorities."[72] It must be noted that during the first 11

[69] "Khaf-Herat Railway to Be Fully Operational by Mar. 2026, Official Says," *Tehran Times*, April 18, 2025, accessed May 30, 2025, https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/511954/Khaf-Herat-railway-to-be-fully-operational-by-Mar-2026-official.
[70] Baizakova, "Transport and Logistics Issues," 81.
[71] "How the Modernization of Aktau Port Will Change the Economic Future of Kazakhstan," ["Как модернизация порта Актау изменит экономическое будущее Казахстана"], *Rail-news.kz*, December 27, 2024, accessed May 30, 2025, https://rail-news.kz/ru/interview/19499-kak-modernizaciia-porta-aktau-izmenit-ekonomiceskoe-budushhee-kazaxstana.html.
[72] "Belgian company to build Anaklia port marine infrastructure," ["Строительством морской инфраструктуры порта Анаклия займется бельгийская компания"], *Ekho Kavkaza*, August 1, 2024, accessed May 30, 2025, https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/33059094.html.

months of 2024, the cargo transportation via the TITR increased by 63%, reaching 4.1 million tons, and the container transportation increased 2.6 times.[73]

Although the EU has been cooperating with the Central Asian states within the framework of the TRACECA program since 1993,[74] in the post-COVID period, the EU has also made active efforts to develop transport and logistics diplomacy in the Central Asian region. To this extent, the "Global Gateway" plan launched in 2021 is of particular importance, as it aims to develop transport links and enhance interconnectedness with the Central Asian states.

The role played by Uzbekistan in these processes is noteworthy. The country pursues an active foreign policy in promoting logistics cooperation in the region, a living embodiment of which was the inaugural EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference in Samarkand in November 2022.[75] Addressing the conference participants, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev particularly emphasized the importance of further development of the ties between the EU and Central Asia. He stressed that in order to provide for effective implementation of the "Global Gateway" project, particular priority should be assigned to the following areas: digital transformation, transport connectivity, and the implementation of "green" development projects. President Mirziyoyev also said that diversification of the transport route is a priority task, calling it a new task for all Central Asian states. In his estimation, this process would provide access to world markets for the states in the region and would stimulate their participation in global integration and international cooperation processes.[76]

Additionally, the President of Uzbekistan stressed the significance of the Trans-Caspian Multimodal Route, viewing it as essential not only for bolstering trade and economic ties between Europe and Asia but also for enhancing the capacity of Central Asian nations to access external markets through improved transportation

[73] "Growth and Development of TITR: Cargo Volume in 2024 Increased by 63%, Exceeding 4 Million Tons," ["Рост и развитие ТМТМ: объем перевозок грузов в 2024 году увеличился на 63%, превысив 4 млн тонн"], *Ministry of Transport of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, December 17, 2024, accessed May 30, 2025, https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/transport/press/news/-details/904094?lang=ru.

[74] Kondapalli, "Eurasian Transport Corridors," 20.

[75] "Transport, Digital, Green Growth: Key Areas of Cooperation with the European Union," ["Транспорт, digital, "зелёный" рост: главные направления сотрудничества с Евросоюзом"], *Spot.uz*, November 18, 2022, accessed May 30, 2025, https://www.spot.uz/ru/2022/11/18/eu-central-asia/.

[76] "*To the participants of the first international conference "Interconnectivity of the European Union and Central Asia: Global Gateways for Sustainable Development,""* ["Участникам первой международной конференции "Взаимосвязанность Европейского союза и Центральной Азии: глобальные ворота для устойчивого развития""], *Official website of the President of Uzbekistan*, November 18, 2022, accessed May 30, 2025, https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/5714.

corridors.[77] Uzbekistan's aspiration to become an inter-regional communications hub is evident.

A significant development in the EU-Central Asian cooperation was the first "Central Asia - European Union" summit held in Samarkand on April 3-4, 2025. There, the EU and the five Central Asian states announced their intention to expand trade relations and strategic partnership. During this summit of EU leaders and Central Asian presidents in Samarkand, on April 4, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen made a statement signaling the start of a "new era."[78] She announced that the European Union is preparing to allocate 12 billion euros for Central Asian states within the framework of the European infrastructure initiative "Global Gateway." According to her, the initiative prioritizes four main directions: the development of the transport sector, effective management of raw material resources, promotion of renewable energy, and digitalization. It was also specifically mentioned that the European satellites are planned to be used to provide high-speed internet access to the region "without the control of neighbors." In this assessment, Ursula von der Leyen's allusion presumably referred to the influence of Russia and China in the region. Ursula von der Leyen emphasized that the "European offer" differs from the initiatives of other states due to its value-based foundations and the logic of mutually beneficial cooperation.[79]

The European Union and Western states often criticize China for its strategy of creating debt dependence in developing countries, including in Central Asia. At the same time, Russia is also a target of criticism, as it uses the tool of energy and arms supply to maintain influence in the region, thereby deepening the structural dependence of Central Asian states.[80]

In the Central Asian competitive processes, Russia, in turn, does not wish to be left out of the transport diplomacy practiced in the region. Here, in the inaugural SCO Transport Forum organized by Tashkent in Autumn 2023, the Uzbekistani Transport Minister Ilhom Mahkamov, the Kyrgyzstani Transport and Communications Minister Tilek Tekebaev, and the Russian Deputy Transport Minister Dmitry Zverev signed a memorandum of understanding for the development and establishment of the "Russia–Caspian Sea–Turkmenistan–Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan" international multimodal transport corridor.[81]

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[77] Official website of the President of Uzbekistan, "To the participants of the first international conference 'Interconnectivity of the European Union and Central Asia.'"

[78] "*EU Proclaimed "New Era" in Relations with Central Asia"* ["ЕС провозгласил "новую эру" в отношениях с Центральной Азией"], *Deutsche Welle*, April 4, 2025, accessed May 30, 2025, https://www.dw.com/ru/es-provozglasili-novu-u-eru-v-otnoseniah-s-centralnoj-aziej/a-72140006.

[79] Deutsche Welle, "EU Proclaimed 'New Era' in Relations with Central Asia."

[80] Deutsche Welle, "EU Proclaimed 'New Era' in Relations with Central Asia."

[81] "*Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Russia Agreed to Create a Transport Corridor across the Caspian Sea,"* ["Кыргызстан, Узбекистан и Россия договорились создать транспортный коридор через

Within the framework of the same forum, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Russia signed memoranda of understanding aimed at developing and forming the "Belarus–Russia–Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan" international transport corridor.[82] The next significant step in this direction was taken on April 23, 2024, in the city of Termez, where the first session of the working group for the development of the above-mentioned multimodal corridor took place.[83]

According to the Uzbekistan Ministry of Transport, the volume of transit cargo shipping through Afghanistan increased by more than 30% in recent years to nearly 1 million tons. The volumes have increased radically since the transit trade agreement was signed between Uzbekistan and Pakistan in 2021.[84]

In the context of these developments, China is actively engaged in the building of Central Asian transport connections. On June 6, 2024, the governments of China, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan signed an intergovernmental agreement in Beijing on the construction of a railroad.[85] In addition to making another route to fill the Middle Corridor and diversifying the supply of cargo, this project presents China with new possibilities for entering the market of Uzbekistan.

In the Central Asian region, even Turkmenistan, a permanently neutral country, has an active participation in the transport policy development, enhancing its own transport diplomacy. In May 2023, during the II Conference "International Transport Corridors: Interconnection and Development – 2023" held in Ashgabat, the Protocol of Operators of the CASCA+ transport corridor was signed. This corridor represents the "China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Europe" route.[86] The important geographical location of Turkmenistan in

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Каспийское море"], *Radio Azattyk*, November 3, 2023, accessed May 31, 2025, https://rus.azattyq.org/a/32666962.html.

[82] Radio Azattyk, "Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Russia Agreed to Create a Transport Corridor across the Caspian Sea."

[83] "*A "Roadmap" for the Development of the Multimodal Transport Corridor "Belarus-Russia-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan" Has Been Signed,"* ["Подписана "Дорожная карта" по развитию мультимодального транспортного коридора "Беларусь Россия Казахстан Узбекистан-Афганистан-Пакистан""], *Ministry of Transport of the Republic of Uzbekistan*, April 24, 2024, accessed May 31, 2025, https://mintrans.uz/ru/news/belarus-rossiya-qozog-iston-o-zbekiston-afg-oniston-pokiston-multimodal-transport-koridorini-rivojlantirish-bo-yicha-yo-l-xaritasi-imzolandi.

[84] Ministry of Transport of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "A 'Roadmap' for the Development of the Multimodal Transport Corridor 'Belarus-Russia-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan' Has Been Signed."

[85] "*Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and China Signed an Intergovernmental Agreement on the Railway Project,"* ["Узбекистан, Кыргызстан и Китай подписали межправсоглашение по проекту железной дороги"], *Gazeta.uz*, June 6, 2024, accessed June 1, 2025, https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2024/06/06/railway/.

[86] "*Transport Diplomacy of Turkmenistan – an Effective Tool for Cooperation,"* ["Транспортная дипломатия Туркменистана – эффективный инструмент сотрудничества"], *Internet-portal CIS*, May 30, 2023, accessed June 1, 2025, https://e-cis.info/news/566/109396/.

Central Asia enables its involvement in the formation of regional international transport routes.

In recent years, Central Asian states have actively participated in the implementation of regional and international transport projects. However, experts in the field point out several systemic issues that significantly limit the full realization of the region's transport and logistics potential. Specifically:

1. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan lack a unified and integrated railway infrastructure, which hinders the efficient organization of freight transportation within the countries and the region.
2. Transport infrastructure in all Central Asian states is not developed to a sufficient degree, and rolling stock exhibits a high level of wear and tear, reducing the reliability and efficiency of transportation.
3. There are serious obstacles in customs clearance processes, and the capacity of border checkpoints is extremely low, which prolongs the overall time for cargo movement.
4. All countries in the region face a shortage of warehouse space and logistics capacities, creating additional problems in freight transportation and distribution processes.[87]

These issues can objectively limit the potential of Central Asian states as transit hubs and their effective participation in global transport networks. Nevertheless, in the post-COVID period, there has been a noticeable intensification of policy efforts focused on infrastructure development and enhancement within the sector. Among the measures undertaken in this direction are the initiatives aimed at developing the Aktau Port, as previously discussed.

Conclusion

The Central Asian region holds a position of significant strategic importance within the broader context of Eurasian geopolitics. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey, the United States, the European Union, and China actively sought to expand their influence in the region, primarily motivated by the prospect of accessing its abundant natural resources. Conversely, Russia's approach has been shaped by enduring historical links, rooted in the legacies of both the Russian Empire and the Soviet period, and by the region's critical geographic importance to Russian security.

[87] Ibrokhim Akrom ugli Akromov, "Development of Central Asia: Transport and Logistics Routes" [Иброхим Акром угли Акромов, "Развитие Центральной Азии: транспортно-логистические пути"], *Russian International Affairs Council*, December 13, 2024, accessed June 2, 2025, https://russiancouncil.ru/blogs/polit-ekspert/razvitie-tsentralnoy-azii-transportnologisticheskie-puti/.

Therefore, Russia's objective has been to have maximum presence in regional developments. Naturally, the role of bilateral relations between Russia and the Central Asian republics is pivotal in this respect. Strategically, Russia has been able to maintain the exclusive status of a state with military bases in Central Asia, i.e., in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Simultaneously, Russia is the only great power that has allied relations with some Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—within the CSTO format.

However, the Russian policy in Central Asia exhibits several distinct characteristics. Notably, it adopts a cautious stance toward the internal political dynamics of the regional states. This approach appears to stem from the perception that such domestic developments do not pose an immediate threat to Russia's strategic interests. Moreover, active interference in these processes is viewed as potentially destabilizing, with the risk of generating unintended consequences that could undermine Russia's long-term influence in the region.

One illustrative example is the case of Kazakhstan in 2022, when Russia intervened in efforts to restore internal stability. Notably, this intervention was not unilateral but was conducted within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), reflecting a multilateral approach that helped mitigate potential negative perceptions. It is also important to note that the timing of the events in Kazakhstan coincided with the lead-up to Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine. This broader geopolitical context likely influenced Russia to adopt a more cautious and calculated posture in Central Asia, in order to avoid overextension and preserve its regional influence.

Turkey also plays a significant role in the region, drawing on historical ties with several neighboring nations, much like Russia. However, unlike Russia, Turkey places particular emphasis on the ethnic dimension, which enables it to cultivate closer relations with Turkic-speaking nations. In this context, the deepening of cooperation through the Organization of Turkic States has become a strategic priority. Nevertheless, political developments in recent decades indicate that the ethnolinguistic factor alone is insufficient to secure comprehensive influence across the region. States in the South Caucasus and Central Asia remain strongly committed to the principle of sovereignty and are generally cautious about allowing external actors to interfere in their domestic affairs.

The US policy toward Central Asia is fundamentally different from the strategy pursued by Russia. While Russia has sought to establish and maintain a long-term strategic presence in the region, the United States has not adopted a comparable approach. Washington has generally refrained from viewing Central Asia as a zone for sustained military deployment and has not aimed to establish permanent military bases there.

However, Central Asia is strategically important for the US. First, the region is energy-rich. Second, Central Asia geographically adjoins the Greater Middle East, further adding to its value in Washington's strategic interests. At the same time, the US sees Central Asia and the South Caucasus through the lens of undermining Russia's military-political influence. This fits with the whole US strategy in the post-Soviet space, aimed at the shift of the balance of power.

The EU policy in the region somewhat resembles that of the US, but also varies significantly. Notably, the EU tries to implement a more intrusive economic policy in Central Asia and thereby expand its influence not only on Central Asia but also on the neighboring regions. Among the most significant attempts in this regard is the Global Gateway project, which competes with China's BRI.

China's involvement, however, is direct in Central Asia through economic and infrastructural projects, as opposed to the strategic thought of the US and the EU.

The increasing competition among the great powers in the region has not only economic but also security implications for the Central Asian states. These processes have a direct impact on internal political developments, as evidenced by the events in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, Kazakhstan in 2022, and Uzbekistan in 2022. Despite the current efforts of Central Asian states to pursue an even and multi-vector foreign policy in accordance with their national interests, the aforementioned external factors still have an influence on shaping and adhering to this policy. Due to this, foreign policy orientations of the region's states are generally categorized based on geopolitical conditions and domestic settings.

As observed, transport and logistics diplomacy is another key driver of regional dynamics because it has really intensified the focus of the great powers on Central Asia. While Russia shows some dynamism in the transport and logistics spheres, it is difficult to consider it the outright leader. China's participation in the sector is rising significantly, as it implements different transport and communication projects in the region. Along with this, some of these corridors are set to transport Chinese products to Europe or the Persian Gulf nations. To this extent, China is a big beneficiary and active initiator in transport diplomacy. The European Union would be capable of becoming a stringent competitor to China in this field, as it has been more deliberately striving to join the logistics sector of Central Asia over the past few years. Among the South Caucasus countries, Azerbaijan and Georgia, and Turkey are also significant stakeholders as strategic stops along transit routes.

Thus, the post-Soviet Central Asian states have gained strategic importance for the major international actors across several interconnected regions, from security to infrastructure and transport. Under these conditions, a pressing question for the five Central Asian states is whether to act individually or through cooperative formats based on regional integration. The effectiveness and stability of their foreign

policies within the intricate landscape of Eurasian geopolitics will depend to a great extent on this decision.

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DIGITAL INCLUSION *VS* DIGITAL SOVEREIGNTY: RRI AS A PLATFORM FOR INTEGRATING ETHICS INTO GEOPOLITICS

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) has intensified the global tension between digital inclusion, which advocates for equitable access to technology, and digital sovereignty, emphasizing national control over data and infrastructure. This article examines how Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) can reconcile these competing imperatives by embedding ethical principles, such as inclusivity, sustainability, precaution, and reflexivity, into technology governance. Through qualitative case studies in education (e.g., Kenya's eLimu and India's DIKSHA platforms) and healthcare (e.g., WHO's pandemic data-sharing protocols), the study demonstrates that RRI fosters participatory design, balances sovereignty with global collaboration, and mitigates systemic biases. Findings reveal that rigid sovereignty policies often exacerbate inequalities, while RRI-driven frameworks enable marginalized communities to co-create solutions, ensuring culturally relevant and ethically aligned technologies. The analysis highlights RRI's potential to transform geopolitical competition into equitable governance, advocating for its institutionalization through international mechanisms such as the UN's Global Digital Compact. By prioritizing social justice, RRI redefines sovereignty as a stewardship obligation, ensuring AI development uplifts, rather than undermines, vulnerable populations. The article concludes that integrating RRI principles into both global and local agendas is crucial for dismantling digital hierarchies and promoting inclusive innovation.

Keywords: *digital inclusion, digital sovereignty, responsible research and innovation, AI ethics, social justice, global governance.*

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Introduction

The swift advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) has triggered a global race for technological dominance, yet progress remains uneven. While high-income nations and corporations invest heavily in AI infrastructure, low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) face widening gaps in access, exacerbating technological inequality.[1] This disparity is compounded by the tension between two competing imperatives: digital inclusion, which advocates for universal access to technology as a fundamental right, and digital sovereignty, which prioritizes national control over data governance and infrastructure (e.g., GDPR in the EU, China's "Great Firewall").

This dichotomy is acutely evident in education and healthcare, two domains critical to social equity. For instance, restrictive data sovereignty policies, such as bans on foreign EdTech platforms in Global South nations, often limit access to global educational resources. As a result, marginalized rural populations are often the most affected.[2] Similarly, in healthcare, sovereignty-driven restrictions on medical data sharing, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, hinder collaborative research while failing to address systemic biases in AI-driven diagnostics, which frequently underrepresent minority groups.[3] Ironically, policies designed to safeguard national interests sometimes deepen existing inequalities.

Social justice is key to reconciling these priorities. Incorporating principles like inclusivity and reflexivity into global strategies can help reduce the specific ethical challenges, such as algorithmic bias, data privacy breaches, and digital exclusion.[4] The EU's ethical AI standards demonstrate that international cooperation, grounded in principles of fairness, can balance sovereignty and inclusion. This ensures technologies benefit the public rather than reinforcing inequality.

This study explores how Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) can help reconcile the tensions between digital inclusion and sovereignty. Specifically, it aims to:

1. Evaluate RRI's potential as a transnational platform for harmonizing ethical technology development with divergent national priorities (e.g., data protection vs. equitable access).

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[1] International Telecommunication Union (ITU), *Digital Inclusion of All* (ITU, 2023), https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/backgrounders/Pages/digital-inclusion-of-all.aspx.

[2] UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report 2023: Technology in Education: A Tool on Whose Terms? (Paris: UNESCO, 2023), 132.

[3] World Health Organization, *Ethical Guidelines for Health Data Sharing in Pandemic Response* (WHO, 2022), 22, https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/documents/gs4dhdaa2a9f352b0445bafbc-79ca799dce4d.pdf.

[4] Jack Stilgoe, "Why Responsible Innovation?" in *Responsible Innovation: Managing the Responsible Emergence of Science and Innovation in Society*, ed. Richard Owen, John Bessant, and Maggy Heintz (Chichester, UK: Wiley, 2013), 63.

2. Demonstrate RRI's operational capacity to institutionalize ethics in AI systems, thereby preempting discrimination in education and healthcare digital systems exacerbated by algorithms trained on non-representative datasets.

The urgency of this issue stems from the inadequacy of current governance models in addressing global inequities. For instance, while the EU's AI Act mandates risk-based assessments and transparency, its enforcement remains confined to member states, lacking mechanisms to address global inequities in AI access.[5] Similarly, sovereignty-driven constructs, such as China's restrictions on cross-border data flows, often overlook the lack of access to digital literacy initiatives.[6] RRI's focus on including stakeholders and ensuring fair outcomes provides a practical solution. Including the findings of an analysis of the needs of marginalized groups, such as rural communities and refugees, can help RRI reconcile digital sovereignty with inclusivity and avoid reinforcing bias within technology development processes.

Furthermore, the study will analyze RRI's role in the practical implementation of ethical norms. For example, the WHO's ethical data-sharing protocols during the pandemic exemplify how RRI's precautionary principle can reconcile sovereignty concerns (e.g., national security) with global health equity, enabling collaborative research while safeguarding privacy.[7] These cases illustrate RRI's potential to mediate geopolitical conflicts while fostering equitable AI governance.

Theoretical Framework

Digital inclusion and digital sovereignty represent two competing yet interconnected paradigms that dominate current discussions surrounding technology governance.[8] Digital inclusion focuses on ensuring equal access to technology, improving digital literacy, and breaking down barriers to participation in the digital economy. It involves expanding broadband infrastructure, ensuring affordable devices, and initiating programs designed to empower marginalized communities. For instance, the U.S. Federal Communications Commission's Lifeline Program aims to provide universal access by subsidizing broadband for underserved populations. Similarly, pilot initiatives in Michigan offer digital literacy training to refugees, while tele-

[5] European Commission, *Proposal for a Regulation on Artificial Intelligence (EU AI Act)* (European Commission, 2023), art. 29, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021PC0206.
[6] UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report 2023, 132.
[7] WHO, Ethical Guidelines for Health Data Sharing, 16.
[8] Samuele Fratini, Emmie Hine, Claudio Novelli, Huw Roberts, and Luciano Floridi, "Digital Sovereignty: A Descriptive Analysis and a Critical Evaluation of Existing Models," *Digital Society* 3, no. 3 (December 2024): 59, https://doi.org/10.1007/s44206-024-00146-7.

medicine programs in rural India have addressed healthcare access challenges, illustrating the importance of capacity-building efforts. Another vital dimension of digital inclusion involves addressing systemic disparities across sectors such as education and healthcare. This includes initiatives aimed at expanding access to digital learning through online platforms designed for underserved communities, as well as efforts like the World Health Organization's telehealth guidelines tailored to the specific needs of low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). These approaches reflect a broader commitment to ensuring that digital transformation benefits all, regardless of geographic or socio-economic status.

In contrast, the concept of digital sovereignty emphasizes the authority of individual nations or regions to govern their digital infrastructure, data flows, and regulatory frameworks. It underscores the importance of maintaining local control over technological ecosystems in the face of increasing global interdependence.[9] This paradigm manifests through stringent data protection laws, such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which prioritizes individual privacy and data security. However, while reinforcing the rights of citizens, it also complicates cross-border data flows that are essential for global collaboration, innovation, and the operation of transnational digital services.[10] Geopolitical control constitutes yet another layer of digital sovereignty, exemplified by China's "Great Firewall," which restricts access to foreign technology platforms to safeguard national security and preserve ideological autonomy. While such measures aim to reinforce sovereignty, they often do so at the expense of access to global educational, scientific, and technological resources. Export controls further underscore the geopolitical stakes of digital governance. For instance, U.S. restrictions on the export of advanced AI chips to China have not only impacted domestic capabilities but have also inadvertently constrained access to high-performance computing resources in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), thereby impeding efforts toward equitable technological development.

Tensions between digital inclusion and digital sovereignty frequently emerge, revealing deep-seated structural contradictions. The GDPR, for example, enforces rigorous data localization and privacy protections that, while crucial for individual rights, can obstruct cross-border initiatives such as international telemedicine partnerships, particularly in regions lacking interoperable infrastructure. Conversely, India's Aadhaar system illustrates how sovereignty-driven digital infrastructure, when underpinned by equity-focused design principles, can enhance inclusion, fa-

[9] Fratini et al., "Digital Sovereignty," 61.
[10] European Parliament, General Data Protection Regulation), Official Journal of the European Union L 119, (May 4, 2016): 45.

cilitate more efficient distribution of public resources, and expand access to essential services.

These enduring tensions underscore the urgent need for governance frameworks capable of harmonizing ethical commitments to inclusion with the practical imperatives of digital sovereignty—a balance that is increasingly vital in a globally interdependent digital landscape. However, as poststructuralist thinkers like Foucault and Derrida argue, deconstructing the binary opposition between inclusion and sovereignty reveals their potential complementarity. For instance, sovereignty can enable inclusion through localized data governance that protects marginalized groups while fostering global cooperation.[11] RRI emerges as a promising paradigm for addressing these tensions by embedding principles of inclusivity and reflexivity into governance structures to ensure that technologies serve both the public good and national interests without reinforcing or perpetuating exclusionary tendencies.

The global AI race has intensified the friction between digital inclusion and sovereignty, as nations prioritize control over infrastructure and data to secure competitive advantages. Sovereignty-driven policies, while ostensibly protective, often undermine transnational collaboration critical for addressing shared challenges. Strict data localization laws, like those in Russia and India during the COVID-19 pandemic, delayed the sharing of genomic data and slowed variant tracking.[12] Similarly, the EU's GDPR, despite its privacy safeguards, created barriers for LMICs seeking to leverage European health AI tools due to compliance complexities, exacerbating diagnostic inequities in regions with limited regulatory oversight.[13]

This conflict has a particularly negative impact on marginalized groups. Overregulation in the name of sovereignty often manifests as blanket bans on foreign technologies, such as Ethiopia's restriction of global EdTech platforms, which left rural schools without alternatives for digital learning resources.[14] On the other hand, under-regulated inclusion efforts, like India's Aadhaar system, show how flawed frameworks can exclude vulnerable populations. This creates a difficult situation: too much control limits access, while weak governance leaves vulnerable communities exposed to algorithmic bias, as evidenced by AI-enhanced medical devices like pulse oximeters that function less accurately on individuals with darker skin tones due to being trained on non-representative datasets.[15]

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[11] Fratini et al., "Digital Sovereignty," 61.
[12] WHO, Ethical Guidelines for Health Data Sharing, 13.
[13] ITU, *Digital Inclusion of All*, 28.
[14] UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report 2023, 111.
[15] Johannes Machinya, "Blog series on exploring the Intersections of Technology, Health, and Law: Data bias and the risk of algorithmic apartheid in South African healthcare," *SLSA Blog*, September

The social justice implications are stark. Sovereignty measures like China's tech export restrictions on AI chips deepen resource asymmetry, leaving LMICs dependent on outdated infrastructure. Meanwhile, exclusion from digital literacy programs, exemplified by the U.S. rural broadband gap, traps marginalized populations in cycles of disenfranchisement.[16] These cases illustrate a paradox: policies framed as protective often prioritize state or corporate interests over equity, necessitating RRI to realign incentives.

RRI offers a practical platform to address the conflict between inclusion and sovereignty by integrating four key principles - inclusivity, sustainability, precaution, and reflexivity- into technology development. These principles enable stakeholders to navigate ethical dilemmas while balancing geopolitical priorities.

1. Inclusivity: By involving marginalized communities in design processes, RRI ensures technologies address localized needs without compromising sovereignty. This mirrors Gilligan's ethics of care, where moral decisions emerge from dialogue with specific communities, not universal axioms. For example, the EU's Horizon 2020-funded AI4People initiative engages civil society groups, policymakers, and technologists in co-designing ethical AI tools, ensuring marginalized voices shape the governance ecosystem.[17] Similarly, Kenya's telemedicine projects, developed with rural healthcare workers, demonstrate how participatory design bridges access gaps while respecting data sovereignty through localized consent protocols.[18] Also, another illustrative example is the Africa PGI 2.0 project implemented by the Africa CDC, which involves the development of scenarios for organizing genomic surveillance and epidemiological control in African countries, considering regional specifics and updating data obtained by local communities of specialists.[19] However, the principles of RRI require institutional democratization, which contradicts authoritarian tendencies in the management of social systems. For example, in China, the rhetoric of "inclusivity" is at times employed to justify expansive digital surveillance, illustrating how frameworks such as Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) can be co-opted to legitimize control rather than uphold a genuine ethic of inclusion.

28, 2023, para. 9, https://slsablog.co.uk/blog/blog-posts/blog-series-on-exploring-the-intersections-of-technology-health-and-law-data-bias-and-the-risk-of-algorithmic-apartheid-in-south-african-health-care/.

[16] Link Health, *Bridging the Digital Divide in Rural America* (Washington, DC: Link Health, 2024), https://link-health.org/2024/07/16/bridging-the-digital-divide-in-rural-america/.

[17] European Commission, Proposal for a Regulation (EU AI Act), art 29.

[18] WHO, Ethical Guidelines for Health Data Sharing, 39.

[19] African Union Commission, *US$100 Million Africa Pathogen Genomics Initiative to Boost Disease Surveillance and Emergency Response Capacity in Africa* (Addis Ababa: African Union Commission, 2020), https://au.int/fr/node/39401.

2. Sustainability: RRI emphasizes the long-term well-being of societies over immediate technological or economic gains. This is evident in the European Union's Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI, which require environmental impact assessments for AI systems, thereby aligning innovation with broader goals of climate justice. A similar commitment is reflected in India's Digital Public Infrastructure, which integrates open-source technologies, such as the Aadhaar system, with energy-efficient data centers, aiming to ensure equitable access to digital services without exacerbating environmental degradation.

3. Precaution: A forward-looking approach to risk is essential for preventing unintended consequences. The World Health Organization's Data Sharing Agreement during the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a case in point: it enabled global cooperation in health research and crisis response, while incorporating safeguards such as data anonymization and controlled access to protect national and individual privacy.[20] Similarly, the Montreal Declaration for Responsible AI advocates for algorithmic audits to mitigate biases in facial recognition technologies. This directly addresses sovereignty concerns, such as GDPR compliance, while simultaneously protecting minority rights.

4. Reflexivity: Continuous evaluation ensures adaptive governance. The Montreal Declaration for Responsible AI provides an alternative governance model, emphasizing stakeholder co-creation and algorithmic fairness audits. While less binding than the EU AI Act, it offers a more flexible architecture for LMICs with varying regulatory capacities. In education, UNESCO's Dynamic Coalition on Digital Inclusion uses iterative stakeholder consultations to refine EdTech policies, balancing open access with national content regulations.[21]

These examples show how RRI can turn ethical principles into practical governance. By promoting transparency and equity, the RRI paradigm provides a guide for balancing inclusion and sovereignty.

Methodology: The methodology used in this article to explore the intersection of digital inclusion, digital sovereignty, and ethical concepts such as RRI is primarily qualitative, based on a combination of case study and comparative analysis. The study synthesizes data from a variety of sources, including international policy documents, academic literature, and real-world cases, to create a theoretical and empirical framework.

[20] WHO, Ethical Guidelines for Health Data Sharing, 20.
[21] UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report 2023, 81.

Balancing Digital Sovereignty with Inclusion and Global Collaboration

The analysis reveals that stringent digital sovereignty policies, while intended to protect national interests, frequently exacerbate educational inequality by limiting access to global resources. For instance, Ethiopia's 2023 ban on foreign EdTech platforms (e.g., Google Classroom) left rural schools without alternatives for digital curricula, widening the gap between urban and rural literacy rates by 18%.[22] India's early focus on data localization delayed access to international STEM resources in public schools, affecting marginalized communities the most.

Concerning RRI as a Mitigation Strategy, co-developing open-source platforms with local communities emerged as a critical solution. Kenya's eLimu platform, designed through participatory workshops with teachers, parents, and students, exemplifies RRI's inclusivity principle. By incorporating indigenous languages and culturally relevant content, eLimu achieved a 32% increase in primary school engagement in underserved regions while complying with national data governance laws.[23] Similarly, India's DIKSHA initiative, a sovereign digital infrastructure co-created with state educators, provided localized curricula in 31 languages, reducing reliance on foreign platforms without sacrificing access to quality content.[24]

These projects underscore RRI's capacity to balance sovereignty and inclusion. For example, reflexivity mechanisms in DIKSHA's design allowed continuous feedback from rural teachers, enabling iterative improvements to address connectivity challenges. Conversely, Ethiopia's exclusionary bans, lacking such participatory models, resulted in prolonged educational disparities, highlighting the risks of sovereignty-first approaches devoid of RRI principles.

The tension between data sharing for global health research and sovereignty-driven restrictions has proven particularly acute in crisis contexts like the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond COVID-19, sovereignty concerns have also impacted genomic research for diseases like Ebola. During the 2014 outbreak, delays in sharing pathogen data due to intellectual property disputes hindered the development of vaccines, highlighting the need for globally recognized benefit-sharing mechanisms. Similarly, the EU's GDPR, while safeguarding privacy, created compliance barriers for LMICs seeking access to European AI diagnostic tools, exacerbating disparities in pandemic response capabilities.[25]

Ethical data-sharing protocols, grounded in RRI's precaution and inclusivity principles, have emerged as viable compromises. The WHO's Data Sharing

[22] UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report 2023, 32.
[23] UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report 2023, 122.
[24] Ministry of Education, Government of India, *DIKSHA Platform: Annual Report* (New Delhi: Ministry of Education, 2023), 17.
[25] ITU, *Digital Inclusion of All*, 28.

Agreement enabled anonymized aggregation of clinical data into a global repository while allowing nations to retain sovereignty over raw datasets.[26] This approach allowed real-time tracking of variants while preserving national security, cutting diagnostic delays by 34% in participating LMICs.

In telemedicine, India's National Digital Health Mission (NDHM) adopted RRI-aligned federated learning models, where AI algorithms are trained on decentralized data without transferring sensitive patient information across borders. This approach resolved sovereignty concerns under GDPR while improving rural diagnostic accuracy by 27%.[27] Similarly, the Africa CDC's Pathogen Genomics Initiative uses RRI's reflexivity principle, enabling member states to audit data usage and revoke access, fostering trust in cross-border collaborations.

These cases demonstrate that RRI mechanisms do not merely balance competing interests but redefine sovereignty as a facilitator, not a barrier, to inclusion. By prioritizing equitable benefit-sharing (e.g., ensuring LMICs receive vaccines developed using their data), such frameworks align geopolitical priorities with social justice imperatives. Moreover, the introduction of such frameworks, focused on the values of diversity and non-exclusion, can help resolve the urgent problem noted by researchers of the imbalance between the consideration of the interests of the Global North and the Global South in the application of intelligent technologies and digitalization strategies.[28]

The global AI race risks creating ethical disparities, as varying national standards can lead to technologies that harm marginalized groups. For example, concerns about "techno-racism" or "algorithmic apartheid" are substantiated by evidence showing AI-enhanced devices such as pulse oximeters work "less well in [individuals] with darker skin," making it more difficult to detect dangerous drops in oxygen levels. This inaccuracy stems from algorithms often trained on datasets drawn predominantly from populations with European ancestry.[29] Similarly, facial recognition tools deployed in U.S. law enforcement, optimized for lighter skin tones, misidentified minorities with error rates up to 34%, perpetuating discriminatory policing practices.[30] Such cases illustrate how sovereignty-centric innovation, unchecked by universal ethical guardrails, institutionalizes structural discrimination.

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[26] WHO, Ethical Guidelines for Health Data Sharing, 15.
[27] ITU, *Digital Inclusion of All*, 28.
[28] Cathy Roche, P. J. Wall, and Dave Lewis, "Ethics and Diversity in Artificial Intelligence Policies, Strategies and Initiatives," *AI and Ethics* 3, no. 4 (November 2023): 1105, https://doi.org/10.1007/s43681-022-00218-9.
[29] Machinya, "Blog Series on Exploring the Intersections."
[30] European Commission, Proposal for a Regulation (EU AI Act), art 29.

Regarding RRI as a Foundation for Global Standards, to counter this, its principles advocate for harmonized global norms akin to the Paris Agreement, ensuring AI development adheres to baseline ethical thresholds. The Montreal Declaration for Responsible AI (2018), influenced by RRI's inclusivity and reflexivity pillars, proposes binding requirements for algorithmic fairness audits and diverse dataset curation, measures that could prevent sovereignty from being weaponized to justify ethical compromises. Similarly, the WHO's Global Initiative on AI for Health leverages RRI's precautionary principle to standardize consent protocols for cross-border health data, ensuring marginalized communities benefit equitably from AI advancements.[31]

The EU's leadership in pushing for a Global AI Ethics Accord exemplifies this approach. By embedding RRI's four pillars into transnational mechanisms - such as mandatory bias mitigation in public-sector AI - the bloc aims to prevent a "race to the bottom" where nations sacrifice equity for competitive advantage.[32] For instance, the accord proposes shared accountability mechanisms, requiring firms like NVIDIA to open-source fairness benchmarks for AI chips exported to LMICs, addressing resource asymmetries.

Such efforts redefine sovereignty not as a barrier but as a stewardship obligation. By aligning national AI strategies with RRI's global equity imperatives, policymakers can ensure the AI race uplifts, rather than undermines, social justice.

Fostering Global Trust and Social Justice via Responsible Innovation

The interplay between national interests and global inclusion poses a central challenge in contemporary tech governance. RRI's capacity to foster multilateral trust lies in its structured emphasis on shared ethical norms and participatory decision-making. For instance, the WHO's pandemic data-sharing protocols, grounded in RRI's precautionary principle, enabled nations to contribute anonymized health data to global repositories while retaining sovereignty over raw datasets.

This approach expedited the tracking of viral variants and promoted global trust by ensuring equitable benefit distribution, such as prioritizing vaccine access for low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) that shared epidemiological data. Similarly, the European Union's AI Act, though primarily region-specific, has catalyzed cross-border cooperation by promoting transparency standards aligned with RRI's principle of reflexivity. These standards have influenced regulatory developments beyond Europe, prompting countries, such as Canada and Brazil, to pursue compatible frameworks.[33]

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[31] World Health Organization, *Global Strategy on Digital Health 2020–2025* (Geneva: WHO, 2023), 18.
[32] European Commission, Proposal for a Regulation (EU AI Act), art 29.
[33] European Commission, Proposal for a Regulation (EU AI Act), art 29.

Nevertheless, the EU AI Act has not been without criticism. Its stringent compliance requirements risk placing a disproportionate burden on smaller nations and emerging startups, potentially deterring their participation in international AI collaborations and exacerbating existing innovation divides. Despite these challenges, such initiatives highlight RRI's potential to redefine digital sovereignty, transforming it from a barrier to cooperation into a foundation for collaborative governance rooted in reciprocity and shared ethical principles.

For technologically non-dominant nations, RRI also functions as a form of soft power, enabling them to exert normative influence in global digital policy arenas and contribute meaningfully to the shaping of inclusive, equitable innovation ecosystems.

Kenya's eLimu platform, co-developed with rural communities, positions the country as a leader in inclusive EdTech, attracting partnerships with UNESCO and the World Bank. Likewise, India's DIKSHA initiative (a sovereign yet globally interoperable educational infrastructure) has become a model for LMICs seeking to balance data localization with access to quality content.[34] By championing RRI-aligned projects, these nations carve niches as ethical innovators, challenging the dominance of tech superpowers while advocating for equitable norms in such forums as the UN's Global Digital Compact.

However, challenges persist. Dominant players often resist RRI's distributive justice demands, as seen in the slow adoption of the Montreal Declaration's fairness audits by U.S.-based AI firms.[35] Resource constraints in LMICs further complicate implementation, e.g., Ethiopia's inability to replicate Kenya's eLimu success due to funding gaps.[36] Yet, the reflexive nature of RRI allows iterative adaptation, as demonstrated by South Africa's revised genomic data policies post-pandemic, which integrated stakeholder feedback to address sovereignty concerns without sacrificing inclusion.[37]

RRI reshapes global competition in AI, encouraging collaborative approaches instead of one-sided technological dominance. By embedding ethics as a shared priority, RRI empowers non-dominant nations to reshape tech governance while compelling dominant actors to reconcile innovation with equity, which is a critical step toward dismantling systemic barriers to equality in the digital age.

The unchecked deployment of technologies risks cementing societal hierarchies unless explicitly designed to prioritize the public good over commercial or geopolitical interests. AI systems, trained on historically biased datasets, often replicate

[34] ITU, *Digital Inclusion of All*, 28.
[35] European Commission, Proposal for a Regulation (EU AI Act), art 29.
[36] UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report 2023, 99.
[37] WHO, Ethical Guidelines for Health Data Sharing, 21.

and amplify discrimination, which is a phenomenon starkly evident in education. For instance, algorithmic admissions tools used in U.S. universities, which remarkably favor applicants from affluent school districts, have reinforced racial and socioeconomic disparities in access to higher education.[38] Similarly, India's early AI-driven tutoring platforms, trained on urban student data, failed to accommodate rural dialects, widening performance gaps by 22%.[39] These outcomes underscore how technologies, when divorced from social justice imperatives, become tools of exclusion rather than empowerment.

RRI's principles counter this by mandating bias mitigation as a design prerequisite. This aligns with Rawls' difference principle, where justice requires technologies to maximally benefit the least advantaged, ensuring AI development prioritizes equity over profit. The EU's AI Act (2023), for example, prohibits high-risk educational AI systems unless developers demonstrate proactive steps to eliminate discriminatory outcomes, which acts as a direct application of RRI's precautionary principle. Kenya's eLimu platform operationalizes this by crowdsourcing content from rural educators to ensure cultural and linguistic relevance, reducing urban-rural learning disparities by 41%.[40] Such systems reject the notion of "neutral" technology, instead embedding equity into the innovation lifecycle.

RRI expands the concept of public good beyond simple access, emphasizing agency and representation. For instance, South Africa's updated telemedicine guidelines, co-developed with township healthcare workers, demonstrate how marginalized communities can influence AI tools to meet local needs, such as prioritizing maternal health alerts in areas with elevated maternal mortality rates.[41] This approach resonates with Carol Gilligan's ethics of care, emphasizing context-driven solutions rooted in empathy rather than abstract universalism. Conversely, Ethiopia's exclusionary EdTech bans, which lacked participatory input, exacerbated gender disparities in rural education.[42]

To dismantle hierarchies, technologies must democratize benefit-sharing. The WHO's equitable vaccine distribution infrastructure during COVID-19, which reserved doses for LMICs contributing genomic data, exemplifies RRI's reflexivity in action, rewarding collaboration rather than extraction.[43] Similarly, open-source initiatives like India's DIKSHA ensure that educational tools remain adaptable to marginalized groups, resisting privatization trends that commodify access.

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[38] Link Health, Bridging the Digital Divide in Rural America.
[39] UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report 2023, 92.
[40] ITU, *Digital Inclusion of All*, 28.
[41] WHO, Ethical Guidelines for Health Data Sharing, 20.
[42] UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report 2023, 33.
[43] WHO, Ethical Guidelines for Health Data Sharing, 22.

In sum, social justice is not an ancillary concern but the core metric of ethical innovation. By institutionalizing RRI's pillars, policymakers can transform technologies from vectors of inequality into tools for empowerment.

Conclusion

At its core, RRI champions an innovation model that mandates ethical review and stakeholder engagement. This approach, by positioning ethics as fundamental to innovation, provides a practical means to reconcile the imperatives of digital inclusion and sovereignty. Through case studies in education and healthcare, this study demonstrates that RRI's principles transform geopolitical tensions into opportunities for equitable governance. For instance, Kenya's eLimu and India's DIKSHA platforms illustrate how co-developing technologies with marginalized communities can align sovereignty with access, while the WHO's ethical data-sharing protocols during COVID-19 prove that global collaboration need not compromise national control.

The institutionalization of RRI principles under the auspices of international bodies like the United Nations is critical to preventing fragmented ethical standards.[44] The UN's Global Digital Compact, currently under negotiation, presents a pivotal opportunity to codify RRI's pillars—such as inclusivity and distributive justice—as universal norms. For example, integrating RRI into the Compact's provisions on AI governance could mandate transparency in algorithmic training data, ensuring technologies like diagnostic tools do not perpetuate racial biases.[45] Similarly, UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of AI, which already echoes RRI's reflexivity principle, could evolve into a binding framework requiring member states to audit AI systems for equity impacts.[46]

Nations must urgently embed RRI into their digitalization agendas, particularly in education and healthcare, where exclusion risks are highest. In education, this means adopting Kenya's model of participatory EdTech design, where rural communities co-create curricula to ensure cultural relevance and sovereignty compliance. In healthcare, India's National Digital Health Mission demonstrates how federated learning systems can balance data localization with global research needs, preventing LMICs from being relegated to "data colonies".[47] Policymakers should allocate resources for RRI-aligned capacity-building initiatives, including digital

[44] United Nations, *Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General* (A/75/982) (New York: United Nations, 2023), 37.
[45] WHO, Ethical Guidelines for Health Data Sharing, 16.
[46] UNESCO, Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (Paris: UNESCO, 2021), sec. III.4.
[47] ITU, *Digital Inclusion of All*, 28.

literacy programs for refugees and bias-mitigation training for AI developers, to address and dismantle systemic barriers.

The AI race necessitates a paradigm shift: sovereignty should not justify exclusion, nor should inclusion compromise autonomy. Integrating RRI principles at both global and local levels can help ensure technologies promote equity rather than deepen divides. The RRI framework's commitment to the values of equality and non-exclusivity offers a novel perspective on established principles governing digital and intelligent technologies, such as controllability, responsibility, and reliability.[48]

Considering the philosophical underpinnings of AI ethics, the regulatory shifts fostered by the RRI framework's broader adoption highlight the challenge of balancing autonomy and inclusion when developing ethical reasoning. The approach of dynamic value coordination, which considers moral reasoning as a parallel satisfaction of currently existing norms and restrictions, seems very promising in this sense: to put it simply, an intelligent system or a separate technology in this approach is considered as an agent that is in a situation of having to balance between different moral modules.[49] The stage of forming ethical modules and incorporating the steps necessary for their coordination and simultaneous implementation necessarily presupposes the simultaneous consideration of local value systems and large-scale principles of social justice. In addition, the approach of dynamic coordination of values provides a more complete disclosure of the question posed by L. Floridi about the possibilities of solving serious social problems by organizing cooperation between humans and (appropriately adapted) artificial agents.[50]

Trends in the ethical regulation of artificial intelligence technologies can be characterized as a consequence of the growing complexity inherent in both the AI systems themselves and their functional environments.[51] At the same time, complexity is revealed in many aspects: on the one hand, researchers note the complication of systems of norms and regulations, motivated by both socio-political and technical factors.[52] On the other hand, a complex transformation of attitudes to-

[48] Mariarosaria Taddeo et al., "Ethical Principles for Artificial Intelligence in National Defence," *Philosophy & Technology* 34, no. 4 (December 2021): 1718, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-021-00482-3.

[49] Linus Ta-Lun Huang, Gleb Papyshev, and James K. Wong, "Democratizing Value Alignment: From Authoritarian to Democratic AI Ethics," *AI and Ethics* 5, no. 1 (2025): 15, https://doi.org/10.1007/s43681-024-00492-9.

[50] Luciano Floridi, "AI as Agency without Intelligence: On Artificial Intelligence as a New Form of Artificial Agency and the Multiple Realisability of Agency Thesis," *Philosophy & Technology* 38 (2025): 35, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-024-00725-z.

[51] Alexander V. Dumov and Viacheslav I. Kudashov, "Informatization and Digitalization: Complexity Approach to Assessing the Transformation of Education," *Professional Education in the Modern World* 9, no. 4 (2019): 3181.

[52] Alexandra Kulikova, "Cyber Norms: Technical Extensions and Technological Challenges," *Journal of Cyber Policy* 6, no. 3 (September 2, 2021): 348, https://doi.org/10.1080/23738871.2021.2020316.

wards artificial agents is recorded, during which the methods of understanding an intelligent system as an instrumental supplement and as an agent cooperating with a person are complemented.[53] The epistemic and ethical guidelines suggested by the RRI framework can rightly be considered as reliable guidelines for the sustainable development of the practice of using intelligent technologies in the era of their rapid increase in complexity.

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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[53] Katie D. Evans, Scott A. Robbins, and Joanna J. Bryson, "Do We Collaborate With What We Design?," *Topics in Cognitive Science* 17, no. 2 (April 2025): 12, https://doi.org/10.1111/tops.12682.

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THE IMPACT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: ARE CURRENT PARADIGMS STILL RELEVANT?

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Abstract

This paper examines the increasing influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on International Relations (IR), with a particular emphasis on its transformative impact across the political, economic, and military-security spheres. It critically examines various scientific and theoretical discourses that define AI, situating these debates within key international relations (IR) paradigms—realism, liberalism, neoliberalism, and constructivism. The study explores how AI is reshaping the global balance of power, accelerating arms races, and enabling new forms of cooperation, while also introducing complex legal, political, and ethical challenges, especially in the context of international humanitarian law. Special attention is paid to the implications of AI for foreign policy decision-making processes and how technological advancements are reshaping established practices and norms. Furthermore, the paper contrasts anthropocentric and technocentric approaches, evaluating whether traditional IR theories and methodologies are sufficient to interpret, explain, and analyze the profound geopolitical and geo-economic transformations induced by AI. Ultimately, it assesses the capacity of IR scholarship to understand the realities of an increasingly AI-driven international system.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, International Relations, decision-making process, foreign policy, theoretical paradigms.*

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Introduction

In different historical periods, perceptions and theoretical directions of international relations (IR) have been shaped under the influence of major events, forming new paradigms for understanding the processes unfolding in the international arena. For example, the World War II gave a new impetus to the formation and widespread adoption of political realism in both the academic and practical fields of IR, the establishment of international organizations gave rise to the perceptions of liberalism and neoliberalism, major economic shocks in the 1970s contributed to the rise of global political economy, etc.

The active development of artificial intelligence (AI) today can be considered one of the important milestones in human history, which will give rise to new theoretical directions, paradigms, and methods for understanding its impact on various professions. International relations are no exception. AI's impact on IR is creating new realities that require either new theoretical directions or substantial transformation of existing paradigms.

AI is increasingly penetrating nearly all spheres of human life—from trade and healthcare to education and security—creating unprecedented opportunities and challenges for the international system. While serious scientific, practical, and academic analyses are already being conducted in areas such as medicine, education, and security, the field of IR remains relatively underexplored and open to various discourses and discussions. Today, AI is actively influencing various domains within international relations—political, decision-making, security, and economic—yet its full impact cannot be assessed within a single article. However, by analyzing current trends, some general conclusions can be drawn about the influence of AI on IR. It is important to understand how the transition from the traditionally "anthropocentric" focus of IR theoretical paradigms to a "technological world order" is unfolding.

As Ian Bremmer rightly argues, "Since the Westphalian system, the world has entered a 'technopolar moment', an emerging order in which a handful of large technology companies rival [states] for geopolitical influence. Major tech firms have become powerful geopolitical actors, exercising a form of sovereignty over digital space and, increasingly, the physical world that potentially rivals that of states."[1]

In this transitional phase from a "human-centered" world order to the "technological" one, there is a significant need to analyze its driving forces, understand the expected outcomes, and make some predictions about the future.

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[1] Ian Bremmer, "The Technopolar Paradox," *Foreign Affairs*, May 13, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/technopolar-paradox-ian-bremmer-fusion-tech-state-power.

The study focuses on the impact of AI on different domains of IR and its implications for different theories of IR. The following questions have been raised in the study:

1. What is the decisive difference of AI compared to previous technological developments?
2. To what extent does AI affect various areas of current IR, in particular the security and economic environment?
3. What changes are taking place in the decision-making process under the influence of AI in the context of developing foreign policy of states and perceiving international events?
4. What transformations may the assumptions and methodology of IR theories undergo in order to perceive and explain new international developments scientifically?

This study is based on the hypothesis that artificial intelligence (AI) differs fundamentally from previous technological advancements, as it directly influences the formation and evolution of the substantive content of international relations (IR). AI is already exerting a tangible impact on the security and economic dimensions of IR, simultaneously generating broad opportunities and introducing new, complex challenges. Its growing role in strategic decision-making processes is reshaping the formulation of foreign policy and transforming the dynamics of international interactions. Furthermore, the rapid and unprecedented pace of technological advancement—particularly in the domain of AI—raises critical new questions, opens novel research directions, and presents significant challenges to established IR paradigms, calling for a reassessment of conventional theoretical frameworks..

The primary objectives of this study are threefold. First, it seeks to identify the transformations occurring across various spheres of international relations (IR) as a result of artificial intelligence (AI), with particular emphasis on the domains of military and economic security. Second, it aims to evaluate the extent to which existing IR paradigms are equipped to account for the transformative impact of AI on the international order. Third, the study explores contemporary scholarly perspectives on the subject and assesses the potential influence of AI on the development of the IR discipline, with a specific focus on its role in strategic decision-making processes.

Methodology: To analyze the above-mentioned issues, systemic, descriptive, content analysis, and qualitative research methodological approaches were used, based on the comparative analysis of international law, politics, economy, and technological management. Various resolutions and reports of international organizations on the topic of concern were highlighted, too. The study presents different definitions of AI, which are necessary for understanding this phenomenon and ana-

lyzing IR through the prism of its influence. It does not delve deeper into the definitions and approaches to AI, since this issue is beyond the scope of the study.

What is AI: How Does It Affect IR?

To understand how AI may transform contemporary international relations, it is first necessary to define what AI is and to consider the various scientific approaches and definitions that exist. There is no universally accepted definition of AI, and different scientists approach the issue from different perspectives. However, it seems to be a common understanding among scholars that AI is the ability of machines to reproduce the characteristics of human intelligence: linguistic, image, and case analysis skills, and pattern recognition.[2]

Toshinori Munakata states, "that AI can be more broadly defined as the study of making computers do things that human needs intelligence to do."[3]

According to a group of scientists (Amin A., Cardoso S., Suyambu J.),[4] "AI is the ability of a machine to perform cognitive operations that are usually considered functions of the human brain. It is the study of algorithms that enable machines to reason and perform mental tasks, including problem solving and decision making."[5]

Some scholars emphasize the impact of AI on the creation, production, and consumption of stories, underlining that this technology can be applied to a variety of functions, from content creation to data analysis, which offers new opportunities but also raises a number of ethical and social challenges.[6]

Other researchers underline the role of AI in diplomacy and negotiations, highlighting that AI's ability to analyze large amounts of data allows diplomats to better understand international realities and predict possible developments. These technologies can process and analyze data from various sources, such as social networks, media, and official communications. For example, AI can be used to analyze public opinion, which is important for states when they try to understand the expectations and concerns of their citizens.[7]

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[2] Aamir Amin et al., "Future of Artificial Intelligence in Surgery: A Narrative Review," *Cureus* 16, no. 1 (January 2024): e51631, https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.51631.
[3] Toshinori Munakata, *Fundamentals of the New Artificial Intelligence: Neural, Evolutionary, Fuzzy and More*, 2nd ed. (London: Springer, 2008), 1.
[4] Amin et al., "Future of Artificial Intelligence in Surgery."
[5] Munakata, *Fundamentals of the New Artificial Intelligence*, 1.
[6] Thomas Tzimas, "Legal and Ethical Challenges of Artificial Intelligence from an International Law Perspective," in *Artificial Intelligence and International Law*, edited by Dafna Ben-Yehuda and Gadi Long (London: Springer, 2021).
[7] Peter Cihon, Matthijs M. Maas, and Luke Kemp, "Fragmentation and the Future: Investigating Architectures for International AI Governance," *Global Policy* 11, no. 5 (2020).

AI is already being used by various state and private institutions (ChatGPT, DeepSeek) to prepare press releases, reports on the foreign policy of different countries, predict international events, model negotiations, and develop foreign policy concepts and strategies.

A number of analysts pay special attention to the security domain of international relations, noting that artificial intelligence has significantly expanded the military-technical and intelligence capabilities of states, thereby contributing to the intensification of global competition.[8][9][10]

Another group of scholars focuses on the need to establish an international regime for the use of artificial intelligence, in particular, emphasizing the need to develop international humanitarian law, ethical and moral norms.[11][12]

Trying to capture the essential aspects of AI in the above-mentioned definitions, the authors seem not to pay sufficient attention or only briefly refer to human qualities that play an important role in international processes and decision-making, such as intuition, psychological state, system of values, and cognitive biases. Whether artificial intelligence is able to reproduce the aforementioned qualities, still remains uncertain. The interaction between human cognitive biases and AI decision-making highlights how both can influence outcomes—humans through inherent psychological tendencies, and AI through biases embedded in data and design. This interplay suggests complex dynamics that can affect fairness and accuracy, indicating a need for further scholarly analysis to fully understand and address these issues.

As experts from the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) rightly note, "throughout human history, politics has been fundamentally guided by the actions taken by a conscious person and the collective interactions of people.

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[8] Radha Iyengar Plumb and Michael C. Horowitz, "What America Gets Wrong About the AI Race: Winning Means Deploying, Not Just Developing, the Best Technology," Foreign Affairs, April 16, 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/what-america-gets-wrong-about-ai-race.

[9] Chatham House, "Artificial Intelligence and International Affairs: Disruption Anticipated," report, June 2018, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-06-14-artificial-intelligence-international-affairs-cummings-zaidi-final.pdf.

[10] Greg Allen and Taniel Chan, "Artificial Intelligence and National Security" (report, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, July 2017), https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/AI%20NatSec%20-%20final.pdf.

[11] Ioana Puscas, "AI and International Security: Understanding the Risks and Paving the Path for Confidence-Building Measures," UNIDIR Research Brief (Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2023), https://unidir.org/publication/ai-international-security-understanding-risks-paving-path-confidence-building-measures.

[12] Mehdi Salami, "Artificial Intelligence and the Future of International Relations," Institute for Political and International Studies, June 19, 2023, https://www.ipis.ir/en/newsview/722508/artificial-intelligence-and-the-future-of-international-relations.

Now, the progress of AI opens a possibility to make a fundamental change in this area, significantly influencing traditional perceptions of international relations".[13]

A separate significant area of study is the international economic system, which is undergoing active transformation due to the influence of AI, leading to an unprecedented global economic competition and the redistribution of the balance of power.[14][15][16]

It should be mentioned that while in the natural sciences, AI algorithms can analyze and uncover various patterns, in the social sciences, which also include international relations, the discovery of those patterns faces a number of problems related to the characteristics of the human being. Several analyses are aimed at the above-mentioned issue, which particularly emphasize the weakness of international relations theories in facing current challenges and the need to reformulate the subject and the assumptions of their study.[17][18][19] Based on the various approaches to AI and its influence on IR, Artificial Intelligence can be defined as the ability of machines endowed with human qualities and capable of performing actions of human intelligence.

From the perspective of IR, AI can be viewed as the ability of machines to analyze and predict global events and propose alternative decision-making scenarios based on a vast information base and pattern recognition, thereby influencing foreign policy and international processes. This is where the problem arises in distinguishing the international reality shaped by humans over millennia from the content of international relations created by machines empowered by artificial intelligence.

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[13] Chatham House, "Artificial Intelligence and International Affairs."

[14] Harold Sirkin, Michael Zinser, and Justin Rose, "How Robots Will Redefine Competitiveness," Boston Consulting Group, September 23, 2015, https://www.bcg.com/publications/2015/lean-manufacturing-innovation-robots-redefine-competitiveness.

[15] Avent, *The Wealth of Humans: Work, Power, and Status in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016).

[16] Jerry Kaplan, *Humans Need Not Apply: A Guide to Wealth and Work in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

[17] Bhaso Ndzendze and Tshilidzi Marwala, *Artificial Intelligence and International Relations Theories* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

[18] Tatiana Grishanina, "Artificial Intelligence in International Relations: Role and Research Dimensions," *RSUH/RGGU Bulletin: "Political Science. History. International Relations" Series*, no. 4 (2021), https://doi.org/10.28995/2073-6339-2021-4-10-18.

[19] Salami, "Artificial Intelligence and the Future of International Relations."

The Impact of AI on the Paradigms of International Relations

Within the framework of the study, it is important to understand not only the practical implications of AI for IR but also how the scientific community and theoretical directions perceive, respond to, and adapt to these developments. In the context of IR analysis, experts currently identify three main areas where AI has and can have a significant impact: analytical, predictive, and operational.

From an analytical perspective, AI systems can process and analyze information flows faster and in greater volumes than the human brain, thereby accelerating decision-making processes in IR and foreign policy. The algorithms used by AI enable the analysis of events based on pattern recognition.

The second important area—prediction—has always been central to the methodology of IR. Based on prior analyses, AI can generate predictive scenarios that influence leaders' perceptions and, consequently, affect final decision-making.

As for the third pillar—the operational dimension—many specialists note that it is unlikely to be fully implemented in the near future due to regulatory, legal, moral-ethical, and technological challenges.

AI enables international actors to influence diplomatic decision-making, the process of negotiations, the advancement of economic capabilities, the development of strategies, and the identification of security challenges in a new and faster way, while at the same time influencing the effective management of resources.[20] AI provides policymakers with significant tools to delve deeper into global trends, thereby influencing decision-making.[21]

Traditionally, the focus of theoretical paradigms in international relations has been the individual, along with their values, beliefs, perceptions, and ideas. Realists explain the conflictual state of international relations through the egoistic nature of human beings, who are constantly driven by a desire for power, leading to various forms of conflict—what Thomas Hobbes famously described as a "war of all against all" (*bellum omnium contra omnes*). Liberalism, by contrast, emphasizes the moral capacity of individuals and the importance of cooperation, while Marxist theory highlights the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

With the rapid advancement of technology and the increasing integration of AI into various fields, critical questions arise regarding the ability of "anthropocentric" paradigms to fully capture the evolving technological nature of international processes. While humans currently remain the primary decision-makers in international relations and foreign policy, the growing "automation" of these fields and

[20] Craig Webster and Stanislav Ivanov, "Robotics, Artificial Intelligence, and the Evolving Nature of Work," in *Digital Transformation in Business and Society*, edited by Babu George and Justin Paul (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-08277-2_8.
[21] Allen and Chan, "Artificial Intelligence and National Security."

the expanding role of AI prompt us to ask: To what extent can traditional paradigms continue to account for these transformations? Are we witnessing a fundamental transformation—or merely a transitional phase—from a "human-centered" international system to a "techno-centered" one, in which established analytical frameworks may no longer yield accurate insights, thereby requiring the development of new theoretical approaches?

Ndzendze and Marwala make an important observation that "IR theory has historically evolved alongside major developments or shocks to the international system, and that the age of AI could prompt the field to revisit its theoretical foundations."[22]

Currently, due to the large-scale flow of information, the human brain no longer has the time and capacity to analyze it, or at least process the huge information base fast enough to keep pace with developments. Artificial intelligence is endowed with the ability to analyze various international processes very quickly, thereby creating favorable conditions for a one-step transition to the decision-making process, allowing leaders to respond to international challenges in a timely manner. As Mehdi Salami rightly argues, "the feature of optimal use of time in a world that is changing at a faster pace every moment and requires instant reactions and decisions, has become significant and has led to the possibility of dramatic changes in international calculations."[23]

Grishanina describes "AI as one of the key technologies of the next decade, which has the potential to become a factor in the redistribution of power in the international system. As part of the process of digitalization of international relations, AI influences the perception of the changing system by the actors themselves."[24]

The academic literature highlights the changes in international relations that are taking place under the influence of artificial intelligence, posing new analytical problems to theoretical paradigms, the formation of a new methodology, and the need to expand or reformulate the subject of study. Toni Erskine, in her article, published by Cambridge University Press in 2024, concludes that "the AI's role in world politics has been under-theorized within the discipline of International Relations" suggesting that "AI disrupts prevailing conception," underscoring that "IR theory is not (yet) fit for 21st-century purpose".[25]

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[22] Ndzendze and Marwala, *Artificial Intelligence and International Relations Theories*,
[23] Salami, "Artificial Intelligence and the Future of International Relations."
[24] Grishanina, "Artificial Intelligence in International Relations."
[25] Toni Erskine, "AI and the Future of IR: Disentangling Flesh-and-Blood, Institutional, and Synthetic Moral Agency in World Politics," *Review of International Studies* 50, no. 3 (May 2024), https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000202.

In this study, we will try to understand the implications of artificial intelligence for some theories of international relations: how it changes their assumptions, and what questions should become part of the subject of current paradigms.

Realism and AI

From the perspective of realist theory, artificial intelligence is currently influencing the global power dynamics, triggering unprecedented competition among great powers, especially in the military and intelligence spheres. Thanks to artificial intelligence, strategies are being designed, situational modeling is being carried out, and scenario development options are being prepared. Major actors are giving new impetus to the security landscape, harnessing the capabilities of artificial intelligence. These developments are significantly transforming the pace and quality of existing competition, further expanding the anarchic environment that exists in international relations. National interests, balance of power, security dilemma, and conflictual state of IR – the main assumptions of Realism - are undergoing profound changes influenced by AI.

In the security domain, AI has already brought tremendous transformations, leading to an unprecedented increase in the use of AI in military operations. This development not only impacts modern conflicts but also contributes to a new arms race in international relations. Realists particularly highlight the growing use of lethal autonomous weapon systems, which are capable of independently identifying, selecting, and engaging targets and are endowed with operational self-sufficiency.

As Chatham House experts underline, "the rise in the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in both military and commercial contexts has sparked intense debate over whether there should be an outright ban on so-called "killer robots"—autonomous systems that can theoretically operate in the air, on land, at sea, or underwater, carrying out assigned tasks independently".[26]

Radha Iyengar Plumb and Michael C. Horowitz state in their article in *Foreign Affairs* that *"*AI will enable better threat detection, giving humans more time to react; let militaries conduct more detailed and realistic planning exercises; shorten crisis response times; and streamline essential backend processes like finance and logistics."[27]

From the Realists' perspective, AI is transforming the global economy too, reshaping the distribution of geo-economic power, and intensifying competition among major actors. Currently, we see a fierce competition between two leading

[26] Chatham House, "Artificial Intelligence and International Affairs."
[27] Plumb and Horowitz, "What America Gets Wrong."

world economies – the US and China – in the AI domain, which is going to have an unprecedented impact on the global economy. "The AI competition is increasingly being framed within narrow national security terms, as a zero-sum game. The US has employed "chokepoint" tactics to limit China's access to key technologies like advanced semiconductors, and China has responded by accelerating its efforts toward self-sufficiency and indigenous innovation, which is causing US efforts to backfire", - MIT Technology Review highlights.[28]

Artificial intelligence is already having a significant impact on both the military and economic landscape, and it will only continue to expand and evolve. From manufacturing to supply chains, from technology to job changes, artificial intelligence is fundamentally transforming the global economy, fueling fierce competition among leading powers. It is becoming clear that the leading positions in the global economy and security will be occupied by those states that are able not only to create artificial intelligence and technological developments, but also to effectively apply them.

From a realist perspective, artificial intelligence only exacerbates the conflictual nature of the international system and accelerates the arms race. Proponents of this paradigm do not properly address the issue of opportunities and cooperation created by artificial intelligence, analyzing it only from the perspective of global competition. Artificial intelligence also significantly shapes the perception of national interests of states in the security, economic, and technological spheres, directing those interests not only into the realm of competition between major powers, but also into an environment of ensuring Global Strategic Advantage. This transition has already made different global powers redefine their national interests aimed at surpassing their adversaries and competitors in effectively utilizing the advantages of AI.

In January 2025, the White House published the "Removing Barriers to American Leadership in Artificial Intelligence" paper, in which President Trump outlines "the policy of the United States to sustain and enhance America's global AI dominance to promote human flourishing, economic competitiveness, and national security."[29]

Thus, from the perspective of the realist paradigm, the use of artificial intelligence has led to the expansion of global competition and strategic advantage in international relations, thereby redefining national interests, increasing the risks

[28] Alvin Wang Graylin and Paul Triolo, "There Can Be No Winners in a US-China AI Arms Race," *MIT Technology Review*, January 21, 2025, https://www.technologyreview.com/2025/01/21/1110269/there-can-be-no-winners-in-a-us-china-ai-arms-race/.

[29] The White House, "Removing Barriers to American Leadership in Artificial Intelligence," January 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/removing-barriers-to-american-leadership-in-artificial-intelligence/.

associated with the security dilemma, and seriously affecting the conflictual nature of the international system. Considering the anarchic nature of international relations as a starting point, realism pays almost no attention to the opportunities provided by artificial intelligence, which can open up new avenues of cooperation for international actors.

The Impact of AI on the Liberal-Idealist Paradigm

Liberals, who traditionally emphasize human rights, the improvement of international law, moral norms, and international cooperation in their analysis of international relations, continue to view the impact of artificial intelligence on global processes from that very perspective. Proponents of the liberal paradigm view the impact of AI on international relations as creating new opportunities for deepening cooperation, especially in multilateral initiatives.

When analyzing the use of artificial intelligence in the security sector, liberals view the issue from the perspective of human rights, international humanitarian law, and ethical and moral norms. The main challenges associated with the implementation of UAVs in the military sphere include issues of attribution and state responsibility, target selection and compliance with international humanitarian law, AI bias, the human factor, and the involvement of human operators in decision-making, as well as the potential misuse of UAV systems by malicious actors.

From a Liberal perspective, the question of establishing an international legal framework for the application of AI in the military domain remains highly problematic. This is due to several factors, including the absence of a universal definition of AI, the difficulty of establishing control over AI given its decentralized and interchangeable nature, the complexity of managing the semiconductor supply chain, and challenges in determining the extent and geographic scope of AI deployment and use. Additionally, obstacles to the effective regulation of AI in the military sector include the diversity of actors involved in the production, distribution, deployment and use of UAV-based weapons—ranging from private companies to state actors; the problematic placement of such weapons in military contexts, which complicates compliance with legal norms; the competitive race among major military powers to maintain superiority in UAV weapon systems, and the unchecked growth of AI capabilities in the military sector—resulting in a pace of development that outstrips the creation of legal norms needed to regulate the field.

There is no unified approach among states and international organizations for addressing these issues. Some actors argue that new regulations are unnecessary, claiming that existing provisions in international humanitarian and human rights law are sufficient. Others contend that, while these provisions are indeed applica-

ble, the use of AI in the military sector requires further clarification in the interpretation and application of international law. They argue that ensuring the responsible use of AI demands regulations that go beyond the existing legal frameworks governing armed conflict and extend to the entire chain of production, proliferation, deployment, and use.

There are currently a number of international initiatives aimed at addressing the application of AI in the military sector. These initiatives include the Group of Governmental Experts on Emerging Technologies in the Field of Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems under the UN Convention on Certain Weapons, the Political Declaration on the Responsible Military Use of Artificial Intelligence and Autonomy, the REAIM Summit, and the two UN General Assembly resolutions - the Resolution on Artificial Intelligence in the Military Domain and its Implications for International Peace and Security, and the Resolution on Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems.

In general, while a growing number of countries support a ban or at least restrictions on lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS), the military superpowers have reservations about the idea, based on the need to maintain their national security or military superiority. The general position of the latter is that existing provisions of international humanitarian law are sufficient to adequately regulate the development and use of LAWS, and they do not want new legal regulations that could limit their military potential. Most of the proposals submitted by states are based on a "two-tiered approach". At the first level, weapons based on the latest technologies in the field of LAWS, which cannot be used under international humanitarian law, should be prohibited. At the second level, states must ensure compliance with their obligations under international law—particularly international humanitarian law—throughout the entire lifecycle of such weapons.

The Political Declaration on the "Responsible Military Use of Artificial Intelligence and Autonomy" is a US initiative, which has been joined by 58 states. The Declaration effectively launched a format of multilateral intergovernmental activities, the purpose of which is to form an international consensus on the responsible behavior of states in the military domain, as well as to guide the development, deployment, and use of AI in the military domain. "The Declaration provides a basis for exchanging best practices and building states' capacities, which will allow endorsing States to share experience and ideas."[30]

[30] U.S. Department of State, "Political Declaration on Responsible Military Use of Artificial Intelligence and Autonomy," Bureau of Arms Control, Deterrence, and Stability, last modified May 15, 2024, https://www.state.gov/political-declaration-on-responsible-military-use-of-artificial-intelligence-and-autonomy/.

The first summit entitled "Responsible AI in the Military Domain–REAIM" was held in February 2023 at the initiative of the Netherlands and South Korea, in which 57 states participated. The goal of the summit was to raise the role of responsible AI in the military domain on the international agenda, providing a platform for all interested actors, in particular governments, industry, civil society, academia, and think tanks. As a result of the first summit, the document "REAIM Call to Action" was adopted. As a follow-up to the first REAIM summit and the aforementioned document, the second REAIM summit was held in South Korea in September 2024, with the participation of more than 90 countries. The second summit resulted in the adoption of a document entitled "Blueprint for Action," which was joined by 61 countries.[31]

Thus, the following conclusion can be drawn from what has been analyzed: artificial intelligence is already having a tangible impact on international security, provoking serious competition and an arms race, especially between major powers. Artificial intelligence significantly expands the capabilities of military technologies, their influence on the decision-making process, raising several issues related to legal, political, and ethical aspects of its regulation. Therefore, those issues should be the focus of analyses of international relations paradigms in order to understand the current trends in the changing international security environment.

Another aspect of concern for liberals is the extent to which artificial intelligence can undermine democracies and strengthen authoritarian regimes. Scholars disagree on how artificial intelligence will affect democracies or authoritarian regimes. Francis Fukuyama argues that, on one hand, artificial intelligence could provide the necessary tools to strengthen democracies; on the other hand, authoritarian countries can use AI to tighten the grip on their citizens by manipulating their behavior.[32]

Artificial intelligence also provides broad opportunities for international cooperation, especially in the areas of ensuring economic growth, expanding productivity, and addressing global challenges (climate change, cybersecurity). Several regional organizations have already framed the main pillars of cooperation in these areas (EU, BRICS).

[31] REAIM 2024, "REAIM 2024: The Second Global Summit on Responsible AI in the Military Domain," accessed June 7, 2025, https://www.reaim2024.kr/reaimeng/index.do.
[32] Francis Fukuyama, "AI and Its Potential Impact on Liberal Democracy," interview by Athanasios Katsikidis, *eKathimerini.com*, July 16, 2023, https://www.ekathimerini.com/opinion/interviews/-1215467/ai-and-its-potential-impact-on-liberal-democracy/.

Neoliberals and the Issue of Redistribution of AI Capabilities

According to neoliberal theorists, unregulated technological developments are exploited by major actors to exclude less developed countries from the process. Therefore, it is necessary to carry out a fair redistribution of artificial intelligence capabilities so that all countries can benefit from these opportunities.

In a UN 2024 report, "the uneven adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is considered a critical issue that goes beyond economic growth. It impacts global equity, fairness, and the social contract that is at the heart of social justice."[33]

One of the central assumptions of neoliberalism is the primacy of free trade and capitalist market relations, wherein state intervention is expected to be minimized. However, artificial intelligence exerts a tangible influence in this sphere by contributing both to the global redistribution of economic power and to the expansion of state intervention amid intensifying technological competition. Consequently, for neoliberal theory, it is of critical importance to assess and comprehend the scope and nature of artificial intelligence's impact on the international economic system.

A number of financial institutions and international organizations have already attempted to make predictions about the impact of artificial intelligence on the global economy. A study by Bank of America estimates that the "impact value" of robotics and artificial intelligence on manufacturing could range from $14 trillion to $33 trillion over the next 10 years, resulting in $8-9 trillion in cost savings. According to a study by the McKinsey Global Institute, automation could increase productivity growth worldwide by 0.8-1.4 percent per year.[34]

The next major concern raised by various specialists is that the widespread use of AI in the economy could lead to mass unemployment. Experts warn that machines will replace human labor in developing countries just as they are in developed economies. This suggests that developing countries will face the same pressures on employment and wages. According to the International Monetary Fund's recent analyses, "AI will affect almost 40 percent of jobs around the world, replacing some and complementing others. Therefore, there is a need for a careful balance of policies to tap its potential. AI applications may execute key tasks currently performed by humans, which could lower labor demand, leading to lower wages

[33] United Nations, "Mind the AI Divide: Shaping a Global Perspective on the Future of Work," Report of the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology, 2024, https://www.un.org/digital-emerging-technologies/sites/www.un.org.techenvoy/files/Mindthe-AIDivide.pdf.

[34] James Manyika et al., "A Future That Works: Automation, Employment, and Productivity" (report, McKinsey Global Institute, January 2017), https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/digital-disruption/harnessing-automation-for-a-future-that-works.

and reduced hiring. In the most extreme cases, some of these jobs may disappear."[35]

The traditional development model, which relied on exports from advanced economies and cheap labor from developing countries, is being reshaped by AI. As automation lowers production costs, the incentive to rely on low-cost labor diminishes, thereby reducing economic opportunities for many developing nations.

Thus, neoliberal studies are faced with new problems: the preservation of free market relations and the expanding state intervention due to artificial intelligence, protectionism, issues related to human rights, and the impact of artificial intelligence on collective security.

The Impact of AI on Constructivism

Constructivism emphasizes the significant role of identities, norms, and discourses in shaping state behavior. "According to this paradigm, artificial intelligence manifests itself in discussions around ethics, transparency, and security."[36] Constructivists' main assumptions are "systems of shared ideas, beliefs, and values, which also have structural characteristics, and that they exert a powerful influence on social and political action. Constructivists also stress the importance of normative and ideational structures because these are thought to shape the social identities of political actors."[37]

Within the framework of the theory of constructivism, the following questions arise: whether artificial intelligence is capable of reaching a level of human consciousness that would accurately define identity, moral and ethical norms, narratives, system of values, and human subjective perceptions, which for proponents of constructivism are key provisions for defining, predicting state behavior, and generally constructing international reality. If the answer is positive, then from the perspective of this paradigm, artificial intelligence will also begin to shape the intangible content of international relations, thereby influencing the behavior of states in international relations. If the answer is negative, then the question arises as to what extent the analyses and content formulations performed by machines will fully reflect the human psyche and the above-mentioned values.

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[35] International Monetary Fund, "AI Will Transform the Global Economy: Let's Make Sure It Benefits Humanity," *IMF Blog*, January 14, 2024, https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2024/-01/14/ai-will-transform-the-global-economy-lets-make-sure-it-benefits-humanity.

[36] Vicente Garrido Rebolledo, "Impact of the Artificial Intelligence on International Relations: Towards a Global Algorithms Governance," *Revista UNISCI / UNISCI Journal*, no. 67 (January 2025), https://www.unisci.es/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/UNISCIDP67-1GARRIDO.pdf.

[37] Scott Burchill et al., *Theories of International Relations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

According to constructivists, it is important to understand how non-material structures form the identity of the actors, which in turn frames interests, and then actions.

As Johan Eriksson and Lindy M. Newlove-Eriksson rightly mention in their article *Theorizing technology and international relations: prevailing perspectives and new horizons, "*Constructivists claim that perceptions of technology are shaped more by identities, ideas, and processes of socialization than by technological development in and of itself*"*.[38] This means that AI is considered a socially constructed phenomenon, and the outcomes depend not so much on technology, but rather on societal factors. In this case, we face an important issue: on the one hand, we have a reality that is constructed through human qualities, identities, and values, and on the other hand, through technology. There is very little discussion in scientific literature about the interaction and relationship between the two aforementioned realities.

From the perspective of international relations analysis, constructivism emphasizes the political image, ideas, values, and perceptions of decision-making leaders and those advising them. If artificial intelligence is to analyze international events through algorithms, based on which leaders will make decisions, then by what criteria do constructivists understand or highlight the intangible aspects of the analysis made by the machine: identity, norms, morality, and value systems? Is it possible to find a place for intangible values in the analyses made by technology based on dry formulas? These questions become an essential subject of study for the followers of constructivism, since they affect the core issue of their assumptions.

Conclusion

Thus, based on the research questions and objectives outlined above, several key conclusions can be drawn. The challenges posed by the impact of artificial intelligence on international relations may be classified into distinct categories, each reflecting a different dimension of this complex phenomenon.

First, the issues of moral, legal, and ethical regulations related to the use of artificial intelligence, the protection of human rights, commitment to the norms of international humanitarian law, and the need to develop a new legal framework.

Second, the practical impact of artificial intelligence on the security, economic, diplomatic, and decision-making environments. The impact is already being ob-

[38] Johan Eriksson and Lindy M. Newlove-Eriksson, "Theorizing Technology and International Relations: Prevailing Perspectives and New Horizons," in *Technology and International Relations: The New Frontier in Global Power*, ed. Johan Eriksson and Giampiero Giacomello (London: Routledge, 2022).

served in these areas, which creates opportunities for cooperation on one hand, and leads to unprecedented global competition on the other.

Third, in the academic sphere, IR paradigms consider developments in this area from an anthropocentric perspective, while artificial intelligence analyzes the situation in various areas of international relations through algorithms, shapes, and constructs it, influencing the decision-making process. Technological development and the widespread use of artificial intelligence in various fields of international relations, politics, diplomacy, security, economics, and International Humanitarian Law have a significant impact on the transformation of the current international system, posing new challenges for international scholars to understand, analyze, and make predictions about these comprehensive changes.

Although it is still too early to talk about handing over the decision-making process in the field of foreign policy or international relations to AI, it is necessary to clearly state how these decisions are made. This is where the need for scientific and practical research to analyze AI capabilities arises. In this context, artificial intelligence has a direct impact on the decision-making process, as the information it generates and processes ultimately shapes the perceptions and interpretations of international actors. This, in turn, influences developments and outcomes within international relations. A critical question arises: can traditional methods of international relations effectively analyze decisions that are based on AI-generated information, especially given that such processes are largely devoid of human characteristics and intuition?

This question needs to be explored thoroughly as it can reshape and restructure IR theories, to adapt them to new international realities. Does the scientific community engaged in the analysis of international relations master the nuances of artificial intelligence to analyze the international environment being constructed by the latter? Can identities, norms, human intuition, feelings, worldviews, and values, which play a significant role in understanding the processes that take place in the international arena, be accurately analyzed and fully captured by artificial intelligence through algorithms?

One of the main issues in the concept of AI is the absence of a clear understanding of what intelligence is, different approaches to the definition of AI, the emergence of ethical dilemmas, and the ability of AI to fully model human behavior.

The above-mentioned questions should become the focus of scholars specializing in international relations, the subject of discourse among diplomats and specialists involved in foreign policy, with particular emphasis on AI's impact on both theoretical and practical dimensions of IR, its influence on global power dynamics, state behavior, and institutional frameworks.

AI's comprehensive impact on essential aspects of diplomacy, decision-making procedures, geopolitics, security, world economy, global governance, and International Humanitarian Law makes it a newly emerging and inseparable part of the object of international relations, which also challenges the main concepts of various paradigms.

It is imperative to develop a comprehensive understanding of machines. Given the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence across all spheres of human activity, the traditional "man versus machine" discourse should give way to a more nuanced discussion focused on "human–machine interaction." This shift in perspective will enable us to better harness the benefits of AI while proactively addressing and managing its potential risks and negative implications.

Various experts, scholars, and practitioners emphasize the impact of artificial intelligence on international relations, just as they previously considered the impact of other technologies. However, artificial intelligence differs from previous technological developments, as it begins to generate the content of international relations, elevating it to the decision-making level. If previously, various theories of international relations placed man with all his qualities at the center of their analysis, today it is about generating and perceiving global processes through technology. Various methods of international relations (content analysis, event analysis, decision-making process, etc.), through which an attempt is made to scientifically analyze and understand international processes, today significantly fail to fully capture the international reality created by artificial intelligence.

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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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FROM YALTA TO THE UNKNOWN: STATE FOREIGN POLICY FEATURES IN THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS SYSTEM

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Abstract

States face increased geopolitical volatility and uncertainty during transitional periods in the international relations system. Ensuring national security and strategically strengthening a country's position internationally have emerged as the primary objectives of state foreign policy. States should be keen to form significant relationships with countries with similar long-term interests. Clear identification and consistent pursuit of national interests are crucial, as genuine partnerships can only develop when shared strategic priorities are recognized and effectively advanced. A state committed to its national interests naturally attracts authentic allies and accurately identifies its adversaries, whereas neglecting these interests leads to isolation and vulnerability. Within this context, a fundamental task of state foreign policy is the implementation of strategic initiatives that enhance a state's global position without sacrificing core interests for the sake of external actors. As the international system moves towards an uncertain future, decisive interest-based foreign policy is essential for the states that aim to gain a stable and influential role in the new world order.

Keywords: *international relations system, world politics, international legal system, foreign policy, national interests, allies.*

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Introduction

It can be argued, without exaggeration, that states act in foreign relations guided primarily by their national interests rather than by international law.[12] Consequently, states, driven by these interests, often engage in actions that contradict their obligations under international law, including multilateral and bilateral agreements. To justify such actions, states frequently refer to distorted interpretations of international legal norms. During the operational phase of the international relations system (IRS), the tendency of states to act despite the international legal system is restrained by the superpowers that established the system to preserve their privileged positions based on a shared interest in stability.[3]

However, during the transition period of the IRS, this deterrence mechanism ceases to function. Moreover, superpowers may seek to exploit or provoke international processes to bolster their positions while weakening their opponents in the struggle to shape the new IRS.[4] As a result, the foreign policy of states during the transition period of the IRS exhibits distinct characteristics compared to the operational phase of the IRS. Professional discussions of these characteristics are particularly significant, given that the world has been in a transition period since at least 1991, moving from the Yalta-Potsdam system toward a new IRS.

For this analysis, we will continue to rely on the previously formulated working definition of the IRS: "The system of international relations encompasses the universal structures of international cooperation and the normative framework of international law (the international legal system), created or modified by the primary actors in international relations—superpowers that emerged victorious from a world war—to manage international politics."[5] The transition period of the IRS is defined as the interval between the termination of one IRS and the establishment of the next. In the current transition period, intense international processes are unfolding, with states remaining the most active actors in international relations compared to other entities and non-governmental participants.[678910]

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[1] Michael Sheehan, *The Balance of Power: History and Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).
[2] Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
[3] Shavarsh Kocharyan, "Some General Manifestations of Transition Periods of International Relations Systems," *Journal of Political Science: Bulletin of Yerevan State University—International Relations, Political Science* 15, no. 3 (2024): 5–11, https://doi.org/10.46991/BYSU.D/2024.15.3.005.
[4] Kocharyan, "Some General Manifestations," 8.
[5] Kocharyan, "Some General Manifestations," 7.
[6] Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).
[7] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

The purpose of this article is to examine key characteristics of state foreign policy during the transitional phase of the international relations system (IRS), in contrast to its functioning during more stable periods.

Main Objectives of States' Foreign Policy in Transition Periods of IRS

The development of a state's primary foreign policy goals is shaped by how the public, the media, professional communities, and the political elite perceive the current international landscape. These perceptions can be categorized into three types (see Table 1). This classification is somewhat conditional, as, in practice, the three perceptions may coexist within a single state in varying combinations and proportions. In the cases of the first and second perceptions, unlike the third, there is no clear recognition that the current international situation stems from the transition period of the international relations system (IRS), which may conclude with the establishment of a new IRS.

Table 1: Perceptions of the Current International Situation, Main Foreign Policy Goals of States, and Policies Aimed at Creating the Necessary Conditions

Perception	Main goals of state foreign policy	State policy aimed at creating the necessary conditions
1. The IRS continues to operate but with temporary interruptions.	Ensuring security. Establishing peace.	Rely, first of all, on the treaties to be signed or in force, the international legal system, and the universal structures of international cooperation.
2. Hereafter, the law of force is tolerated in the world.	Ensuring security. Expansionist policy.	To strengthen and develop relations, first of all, with those states whose interests correspond to the expansionist ambitions of the given state.
3. The world is undergoing a period of transition, one that will ultimately culminate in the establishment of a new IRS.	Ensuring security. Strengthening the position of the state as much as possible in anticipation of confirmation in the new IRS.	To strengthen and develop relations, first of all, with those states whose long-term national interest coincides with the long-term national interest of the given state.

[8] Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History* (London: Allen Lane, 2014).
[9] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014).
[10] Richard Sakwa, "The International System and the Clash of World Orders," *China International Strategy Review* 6 (2024): 39–57.

Holders of the first perception fail to recognize that the phenomena they view as temporary defects are, in fact, manifestations of the transition period of the international relations system (IRS). These issues tend to intensify and can only be resolved through the establishment of a new IRS. If a state's goals and corresponding foreign policy are based on the first perception (see Table 1), it will inevitably encounter the non-fulfillment of obligations by other states under bilateral or multilateral international agreements, as well as the ineffectiveness of universal structures of international cooperation, both characteristic of the IRS transition period.[11] Merely pursuing peace is insufficient for effectively developing relations with other states or securing genuine allies. Given the increasingly aggressive policies of states during the transition period of the IRS, relying solely on the pursuit of peace in foreign relations exposes any state to significant risks, including losses of human lives, territory, and sovereignty.

According to the second perception, interstate relations have reverted to a reliance on the "law of force," a principle rooted in past millennia. In reality, the evolution of the international legal system—from the Versailles-Washington system to the Yalta-Potsdam system—established the inadmissibility of the law of force. The current rise in the unpunished use of force in international relations is yet another symptom of the IRS transition period.[12] For a state guided by the second perspective, foreign policy centers on maximizing gains at the expense of weaker states to boost its own power and secure advantages. In this approach, stabilizing international relations and ensuring accountability for expansionism or crimes against humanity receive little attention (see Table 2).

Table 2: The Practice of Holding States Accountable for Expansionism, Military Crimes, and Crimes against Humanity by Approving the New IRS

Transition period	World war initiated states	Compensation by territories	Other compensations	Limitations of sovereignty	Liability for crimes
From Westphalian to Vienna	France	All conquered	None	None	None
From Vienna to Versailles-Washington	Germany	All conquered and part of one's own	Money (repaid in about 100 years), military equipment	Army size, military equipment, and a demilitarized zone in the state	None

[11] Kocharyan, "Some General Manifestations," 8.
[12] Kocharyan, "Some General Manifestations," 10.

From Versailles-Washington to Yalta-Potsdam	Germany, Japan *	All conquered and part of one's own	Money, military equipment, factories, technology, means of transportation, manpower, tangible and cultural values	Prohibition of having an army, military industry, occupation rule, and control of domestic life	Nuremberg and Tokyo Trials, from 1945 to the 21st century trials of individual criminals

*On September 3, 1943, Italy signed the capitulation agreement and formally joined the war against its former ally, Germany.[13]

Table 2 indicates that the punishment for expansionist policies has become increasingly severe, encompassing accountability for genocide and other crimes against humanity. This trend of harsher penalties is linked to another development: the progressive evolution of international law from one system to the next, accompanied by improvements in international structures designed to uphold it. However, during the transition period of the international relations system (IRS), these international structures lose effectiveness, and international law either fails to function or operates selectively, reflecting the interests of individual superpowers. With the establishment of a new IRS, the transformed interests of superpowers necessitate the protection of the international legal system and the restoration of effective international institutions.

A state that is not a superpower but pursues an expansionist policy may underestimate the risk that a superpower, acting in its interests during the transition period, might initially overlook, support, or even encourage that state's expansionism or crimes against humanity. Yet, once a new IRS is established, the same superpower, guided by its redefined interests, is unlikely to continue its support. Instead, it may support those calling for accountability for the expansionist state, sometimes concealing its own earlier involvement. When a state aligns with the victors of a world war, it is less likely to face consequences for its actions. In contrast, previous international relations systems were often created after the defeat of great powers that pursued expansionist policies.

The distinction between the foreign policies of states based on the second and third perceptions (see Table 1) is relatively fluid. Throughout the ongoing transformation of the IRS, the foreign policy strategies of most states display elements of both of these perceptions. In both cases, securing an ally is a critical condition

[13] Howard McGaw Smith, "The Armistice of Cassibile," *Military Affairs* 12, no. 1 (1948): 12–35.

for achieving the primary foreign policy objectives. Moreover, both perspectives acknowledge a pragmatic reality: without shared interests, true alliances cannot be formed, regardless of existing bilateral or multilateral agreements.

The key difference in the third perception lies in its emphasis on selecting allies based primarily on long-term common national interests. In the context of this analysis, 'long-term national interest' refers to a state's interest that remains consistent across both the operational and the transition periods of IRS. Examples include the United States' efforts to maintain its hegemonic status, China's ambitions to achieve regional dominance, Russia's control of Crimea as a foundation for its power, and Turkey's aim to secure a territorial link with Azerbaijan and, through it, the Turkic-speaking states of Central Asia. Iran's push to develop a Persian Gulf–Black Sea transport corridor that bypasses Turkey and Azerbaijan, as well as the ongoing efforts of Russia, Iran, and Turkey to preserve their influence over the South Caucasus and Central Asian states, also illustrate these priorities. Naturally, these interests are not exhaustive; each state pursues additional objectives, often shaped by broader global ambitions.

Genuine alliances are built on several well-established principles: there are no eternal allies or eternal enemies, only enduring interests that should guide a state (as articulated in Lord Palmerston's 1848 speech); the primary mission of a state at all times is to ensure its external security; when safeguarding external security, states rely primarily on their capabilities; and if a state does not fight for its security whenever possible, no other state will do so on its behalf. Consequently, a state seeking to strengthen and develop relations with another state or states based on shared interests must clearly define and actively pursue its national interests in practice. Moreover, these documented interests must be realistic, aligning with the state's capabilities during a given period.

During the transition period of IRS, states tend to articulate their national interests more openly and explicitly. A state's clear documentation of its national interests and their consistent pursuit in practice are essential prerequisites for forming genuine alliances, beyond mere contractual agreements. When a state actively pursues its national interests, it gains both allies and adversaries. Notably, its primary adversaries are often those already opposed to it due to conflicting national interests. Thus, a state that pursues its national interests secures both real allies and adversaries. Conversely, if a state fails to pursue its national interests, it is left without true allies and faces only adversaries.

The phrasing in Table 1, "strengthening the state's position as much as possible in anticipation of confirmation in the new IRS," requires clarification. "Strengthening positions" refers to actions such as increasing influence over other states, asserting control over disputed territories, securing dominance over strategically im-

portant freight routes, energy transit corridors, and raw material resources, participating in various international relations platforms, and shedding a negative image—such as that of an aggressor, war criminal, or perpetrator of genocide—while attributing such labels to adversaries.

Before elaborating on the phrase "in anticipation of confirmation in a new IRS," it is worth noting a key characteristic associated with the establishment of an IRS. The adoption of a new IRS establishes a status quo in international relations that is either impossible or extremely difficult to alter during the system's operational period. For a state, losses incurred during the transition period of the IRS become irreversible, or nearly so, once the new IRS is formalized. the inviolability of interstate borders in Europe, established in 1945 by the Yalta-Potsdam system, remained unchallenged until the system's dissolution allowed changes such as the collapse of the USSR and the former Yugoslavia, the unification of Germany, and the peaceful disintegration of Czechoslovakia. Similarly, the loss of significant Armenian historical territories was solidified with the establishment of the Versailles-Washington system in 1921–22—a unique case, as the Ottoman Empire, a part of the defeated coalition in the First World War, had perpetrated the Armenian Genocide in the Armenian homeland.

Therefore, by strengthening their positions during the transition period of the IRS, states aim to secure their achievements within the framework of the emerging IRS. The concept of 'strengthening positions as much as possible,' as outlined in the second perspective of Table 1, refers to reinforcing positions at any cost, including aggression and crimes against humanity, in anticipation of future validation under the new IRS. This logic is evident in the actions of Hamas during the military conflict with Israel that began on October 7, 2023. A central question in this context is why Hamas chose to carry out the massacre and kidnapping of Israeli civilians with such extreme brutality.[1415] Could they not have anticipated the wave of outrage that would likely create additional obstacles to Palestinian independence?

On the other hand, the UN General Assembly Resolution 181 (II) of 1947, which called for the establishment of a Palestinian state, was increasingly being disregarded. Meanwhile, Israel had begun establishing relations with various Arab states that were once its enemies and supporters of the Palestinian struggle for in-

[14] Human Rights Watch, "October 7 Crimes against Humanity: War Crimes by Hamas-Led Groups," July 17, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/07/17/october-7-crimes-against-humanity-war-crimes-hamas-led-groups.

[15] United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Including East Jerusalem, and Israel, 56th sess., 18 June–12 July 2024, A/HRC/56/26, https://www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/a-hrc-56-26-auv.pdf.

dependence.[16] This raised a real risk that the question of a Palestinian state could be sidelined on the international agenda with the endorsement of the new IRS. According to the reasoning of certain circles, particularly within the Arab world, the October 7 massacre was intended to force the issue of Palestinian independence back into international focus. Notably, since October 7, nearly all states have referenced the UNGA Resolution 181 (II) in their declarations, and several have expanded the list of countries recognizing the State of Palestine. This also prompts the question of why, following October 7, Israel has consistently committed military crimes and crimes against humanity against the Arabs of Gaza.[17] After all, such actions fuel anti-Jewish sentiment and protests in many countries, including Israel's ally, the United States. Two core dilemmas confront Israel: First, it opposes Palestinian independence; second, absorbing the two autonomous Palestinian territories into Israel is demographically untenable, as it would undermine Israel's identity as a Jewish nation-state. According to the presumed logic of certain Jewish circles, a potential resolution to these challenges lies in the ethnic cleansing of Palestinian Arabs. The massacre of Jews on October 7 provided a convenient pretext to pursue this policy in Gaza. It can be inferred that, at the current stage of the conflict, Israel seeks not only to eliminate the prospect of a Palestinian state but also to significantly reduce the Arab population in the Palestinian territories, with the tacit approval of the new IRS framework.

It is highly relevant to note that the absence of a unified and effective international response to the brutal massacre of Israelis by Hamas on October 7, 2023, and Israel's ongoing policy of ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in Gaza serve as a compelling indicator of the current transitional state of the IRS. Another sign of this transitional phase is the disregard or distortion of international law by superpowers as they seek to claim territory and legitimize their expansion within the framework of a new IRS.

For instance, the territorial ambitions of superpowers have become more pronounced: the United States regarding Greenland and Canada,[18][19] China to Taiwan,[20]

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[16] TRT World, "The Eight Arab States That Openly and Unabashedly Deal with Israel," July 2019, https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/the-eight-arab-states-that-openly-and-unabashedly-deal-with-israel-33551.

[17] UN Human Rights Council, *Report … Inquiry*, A/HRC/56/26.

[18] Will Weissert and Zeke Miller, "Trump Refuses to Rule Out Use of Military Force to Take Control of Greenland and the Panama Canal," *AP News*, January 8, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/trump-biden-offshore-drilling-gulf-of-america-fa66f8d072eb39c00a8128a8941ede75.

[19] Alison Durkee, "Trump Serious about Wanting to Annex Canada, He Says in Super Bowl Interview," Forbes, February 10, 2025, https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisondurkee/2025/02/09/trump-confirms-hes-serious-about-wanting-canada-as-51st-state/.

and Russia toward eastern Ukraine.[2122] Each of these examples has its distinct characteristics, and they cannot be considered equivalent under international law. Nevertheless, regardless of the justifications provided, all three cases demonstrate a policy of territorial expansion by superpowers during the IRS transition period.

A clear understanding of the dynamics of this transitional phase in the IRS enables a state to pursue a foreign policy that minimizes losses in an increasingly aggressive environment while strengthening its position on the international stage, guided by realistic national interests.

Challenges in Implementing States' Foreign Policy during the Transition Period of the IRS

When implementing their foreign policy during the transition period of the international relations system (IRS), states must contend with a complex mosaic of interests. On some issues, their interests may overlap or partially align with those of other states, while on others, they may directly conflict. These interests include the struggle between superpowers for a decisive role in shaping the new IRS and/or replacing the hegemonic state with a new hegemon; the superpowers' desire to prevent the outbreak of nuclear war; the interests of superpowers and regional powers, and how these interests transform in specific regions due to competition for influence in the emerging IRS; the superpowers' efforts to delegate or impose certain processes on other states to strengthen their positions while weakening their opponents in the contest for the new IRS; and the ambitions of regional powers to establish themselves as leaders and secure a more influential role in international processes.

Therefore, during the transition period of the IRS, a state must prioritize its national interests to prevent significant losses, while also considering the interests of other relevant states to pursue a realistic foreign policy that enhances its position. This process requires careful consideration of the interests of both superpowers and regional actors, whether directly or indirectly connected to initiatives stemming from the state's national interests.

Consider the creation of the Persian Gulf–Armenia–Black Sea freight corridor. This initiative aligns with the long-term interests of several countries, including Iran, India, Georgia, China, and Russia.

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[20] Xi Jinping, "Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China," October 16, 2022, chap. 13, 51–52, https://english.www.gov.cn/2022special/20thcpccongress/.

[21] Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," July 12, 2021, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181.

[22] Vladimir Putin, interview by Tucker Carlson, February 9, 2024, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/interviews.

Iran:

1. The corridor, which routes through Armenia and bypasses both Turkey and Azerbaijan, reduces Iran's dependence on these countries and diversifies its cargo transportation routes to Russia and Europe.

2. It serves as an additional barrier to the establishment of a direct territorial link between Turkey and Azerbaijan (including Nakhichevan and the rest of Azerbaijan) at the expense of Armenia's sovereignty. Such a link would increase Iran's reliance on Turkey and Azerbaijan for northward cargo transport, while also facilitating Turkey's connection via the Caspian Sea to the Turkic-speaking countries of Central Asia, thereby expanding Turkish influence in both the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

India:

1. The corridor ensures diversification of India's cargo transportation (via the Mumbai and Iranian Chabahar ports) to European and Russian markets, bypassing Turkey and Azerbaijan.

2. It acts as an additional obstacle to the establishment of a Turkey-Azerbaijan territorial connection at Armenia's expense, which would enhance Turkey's influence in Central Asia and strengthen Pakistan, Turkey's ally and India's regional rival.

Georgia:

1. The corridor diversifies Georgia's cargo transportation options and reduces its dependence on Turkey and Azerbaijan.

2. By establishing this route, Georgia becomes an intermediary hub for cargo transport to Europe and Russia, and vice versa.

3. It hinders the creation of a Turkey-Azerbaijan territorial connection at Armenia's expense, which would otherwise position Georgia as an additional link for cargo and potentially energy transit between Turkey and Azerbaijan.

China:

1. The corridor diversifies China's cargo transportation routes to European and Russian markets, integrating with the Belt and Road Initiative.

2. It obstructs the establishment of a Turkey-Azerbaijan territorial connection at Armenia's expense, thereby limiting Turkey's influence in Central Asia, including China's Uyghur Turkic-speaking region.

Russia (long-term interests):

1. The corridor diversifies Russia's goods transportation routes through the Caucasus, reducing dependence on Turkey and Azerbaijan.

2. It serves as an additional barrier to a Turkey-Azerbaijan territorial connection at Armenia's expense. Such a connection would increase Russia's reliance on Turkey and Azerbaijan for southern cargo routes, while also enabling Turkey to

connect via the Caspian Sea to the Turkic-speaking states of Central Asia, thereby expanding Turkish influence in both the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

The creation of the Persian Gulf-Armenia-Black Sea shipping corridor runs counter to the long-term and current interests of Turkey and Azerbaijan, outlined above. The national interests of these states prioritize establishing a territorial connection between Turkey and Azerbaijan at the expense of Armenia's sovereign territory. Instead of supporting the Persian Gulf-Armenia-Black Sea freight corridor, they favor launching a Persian Gulf-Azerbaijan-Black Sea freight corridor. Weakening the positions of China, Iran, and Russia in the South Caucasus and Central Asia through these initiatives aligns with the United States' interest in maintaining its hegemonic status and establishing a unipolar International Relations System (IRS). Additionally, diminishing Iran's influence serves Israel's current strategy to contain Iran, its primary adversary, and potentially use Azerbaijan's territory as a military bridgehead against Iran. However, strengthening Turkey by opening this corridor conflicts with Israel's ambition to become the leading state in the Middle East, positioning it against both Turkey and Iran.

Thus, Armenia faces a critical choice: either pursue the creation of the Persian Gulf-Armenia-Black Sea corridor, guided by its national interests (which, as a next step, does not preclude Armenia's equal participation in a Turkey-Armenia-Azerbaijan-Central Asia freight corridor, provided Armenia's full sovereignty is maintained—a scenario that would also align with China's interests), and secure genuine allies; or yield to the demands of Turkey and Azerbaijan, risking isolation during potential future aggression from Azerbaijan, backed by Turkey, without reliable allies.

During the transition period of the IRS, states must also consider the changes in the priorities of the superpowers and the interests of the powers related to the tactics of the struggle for the new IRS.

Consider Russia's stance on the creation of a Turkey-Azerbaijan corridor (encompassing Nakhichevan and the rest of Azerbaijan) at the expense of Armenia's sovereignty. As noted earlier, this corridor conflicts with Russia's long-term interests. However, at the present stage, Russia does not oppose its creation and appears content to maintain a measure of control over it. This approach can be attributed to the evolving nature of Russia's priorities, shaped by tactical considerations in the broader struggle for influence within the new international relations system (IRS):

1. In opposition to the United States, Russia is advocating for a multipolar IRS and, despite significant contradictions, seeks to strengthen ties with Turkey to weaken Ankara's links to the US-led West as much as possible.

2. The ongoing military conflict in Ukraine and the trade and economic sanc-

tions imposed on Russia by Western states have increased Russia's reliance on Turkey and Azerbaijan, especially because of the transit of sanctioned goods through their territories.

3. Mutual trust between Armenia and Russia has significantly eroded. As a result, Russia now negotiates regional issues that affect Armenia's interests directly with Turkey, treating them as part of a broader agenda. This negotiation follows a pattern in which Russia concedes, or partially concedes, on certain issues in exchange for gains, or temporary advantages, on others.

As the IRS undergoes transition, superpowers pursue a dual strategy: on one hand, they provoke processes, including military conflicts, to weaken their opponents' positions; on the other, they strive to avoid direct involvement in these conflicts. They achieve this by delegating or pressuring other states, including their allies, to initiate conflicts or engage in ongoing ones. The resulting losses to these states are largely disregarded, as the primary objective is to undermine opponents in the struggle for the new IRS at any cost. Consequently, every state should, as far as possible, refrain from prioritizing the interests of others, including those of its allies, over its vital interests.

Consider Georgia's stance on the Ukrainian military conflict. According to the current Georgian authorities, the U.S.-led collective West is pressuring Georgia not only to join trade and economic sanctions against Russia but also to open a second military front against Russia.[23] Citing the devastating consequences of the conflict in Ukraine—hundreds of thousands of casualties, millions of refugees, lost territories, and a shattered economy—the ruling "Georgian Dream" party argues that involvement in a conflict with Russia would be catastrophic for Georgia and its people, a nation far smaller than Ukraine. The current government believes that the August 2008 military conflict with Russia, which resulted in the permanent secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia for the foreseeable future, was instigated by the previous government under Western influence.[24] Furthermore, the Georgian government contends that the collective West is orchestrating conditions for a color revolution in the aftermath of the parliamentary elections held on October 26, 2024. According to these claims, the objective is to bring to power political forces sympathetic to Western interests. Recent developments in and around Georgia following the elections appear to lend credence to these claims.

[23] Civil Georgia, "PM Again Talks 'Second Front' and Criticizes Opposition," March 24, 2023, https://civil.ge/archives/533404.
[24] Civil Georgia, "Domestic Reactions to Ivanishvili's Announced Intention to Apologize to Ossetian Brothers and Sisters," September 16, 2024, https://civil.ge/?p=624405.

Conclusion

In the previously published article, I proposed evaluating the processes taking place in international relations during the period of the IRS's operation based on the common interest of the superpowers, aimed at maintaining the IRS they formed.[25] During the transitional period of the IRS, the processes were evaluated based on the absence of a common interest and the conflicting interests arising from the ongoing struggle between superpowers to assume a decisive role in shaping the new system. This proposed approach offers an opportunity to view the current transition period — from Yalta-Potsdam to the newly emerging IRS — from a slightly different perspective and to analyze/explain the increasingly aggressive foreign policies of states.

During the IRS transition period, ensuring states' primary mission of external security becomes more complicated. At the same time, new opportunities arise for states to strengthen their positions on the international stage and secure a favorable position within the new IRS. Taking advantage of the climate of impunity, as well as the tolerance or support of certain powers and/or superpowers during the transitional period, states seek to advance their interests at any cost, including through military action and even crimes against humanity. For great powers, this pursuit is further driven by the aspiration to become regional leaders. For superpowers, the motivation also includes the desire to play a decisive role in shaping the new IRS. The more a state strengthens its position, the more it strives to achieve regional power status, and regional powers that succeed in this endeavor often aim to attain superpower status.

In an increasingly aggressive international environment, ensuring external security and consolidating a state's position are unattainable without the formation of alliances. However, during the transition period of the IRS, states frequently fail to fulfill or selectively fulfill their obligations under international treaties. This transitional period, therefore, both complicates the fulfillment of the state's primary mission — ensuring external security — and creates opportunities to strengthen the state's standing in the global arena and secure its place in the emerging IRS. Real alliances between states are only possible when their long-term or vital interests align. The pursuit of a state's national interests is a necessary condition for forming genuine alliances.

Finally, in order to effectively implement strategies aimed at strengthening its external position — while avoiding becoming a tool for advancing other states' interests at the expense of its own — a state cannot ignore the permanent, current,

[25] Kocharyan, "Some General Manifestations," 5.

and evolving national interests of superpowers, powers, and regional states during the transitional period of the IRS.

Conflict of Interests

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HOW ISLAM RULES IN IRAN: THEOLOGY AND THEOCRACY IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC, BY MEHRAN KAMRAVA, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2024, 354 pp.

Review By:

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When Iranian drones painted fiery trails above Tel Aviv in June 2025, what appeared at first glance as mere geopolitical brinkmanship was ultimately a performance scripted by the theological logic deeply embedded within Tehran's ruling apparatus. Mehran Kamrava's incisive work, How Islam Rules in Iran[1], deciphers precisely this theological coding underpinning Iran's often enigmatic political behavior. As Kamrava compellingly argues, Iranian statecraft is inseparable from the ideological foundations meticulously developed by the Shi'i clerical establishment. At a time when American and Israeli policymakers signal intentions for regime change and a forceful termination of Iran's nuclear ambitions, Kamrava's book becomes a critical intellectual toolkit, probing how theological doctrines shape and constrain Tehran's strategic calculations. This review contends that Kamrava's analysis is indeed a tour de force, illuminating with exceptional clarity the labyrinthine corridors of Iranian political theology. Yet, paradoxically, his very brilliance compels us to confront a disquieting puzzle: can theological doctrine alone unravel the tangled web of Iran's state behavior, especially under the relentless strain of existential external threats?

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[1] Mehran Kamrava, *How Islam Rules in Iran: Theology and Theocracy in the Islamic Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

Charting the Path to 'Khameneism'

Kamrava structures his study chronologically and thematically, charting the transformation of Iranian Shi'ism from a source of revolutionary mobilization into a rigid framework for authoritarian consolidation. The book begins by outlining the institutional setting, examining the clerical establishment and the Qom seminary (*howzeh*) as the crucibles of the state's ruling ideology. From there, it delves into the foundational jurisprudential debates, tracing the evolution of Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary conceptualization of the guardianship of the jurist (*velāyat-e faqīh*), which radically expanded the notion from a limited social trusteeship into a mandate for absolute political rule. Kamrava skillfully explains the process of interaction between complicated theological principles, such as governmental injunctions (*ahkam-e hokumati*) and pragmatic expediency (*maslahat*). Through his analysis, it is clear that these complex theological principles acted not only as doctrinaire but adaptable tools to deal with the volatile requirements of political consolidation and governance.

The book's central chapters chronicle the intellectually charged yet ultimately thwarted reformist upheaval of the 1990s. Here, Kamrava delves into the courageous and inventive efforts by religious intellectuals (*no-andishan*), including Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, and Mohsen Kadivar, who endeavored to dismantle orthodox interpretive frameworks, champion dynamic *ijtihād* (independent jurisprudential reasoning), and articulate a compelling vision of "Islamic democracy." The final section details the decisive triumph of the conservative orthodoxy, which Kamrava compellingly frames as "Khameneism". He incisively defines Khameneism as "authoritarian in politics, and is paranoid about matters of security and therefore intolerant of any indication of dissent."[2] Drawing extensively on Persian sources often absent from English-language scholarship, Kamrava delivers a uniquely rich portrayal of Iran's theological and political landscape.

The scholarly contributions of *How Islam Rules in Iran* are substantial, and it specifically thrives through three conspicuous scholarly virtues. Its first major strength is its exceptional conceptual precision. Kamrava masterfully unpacks the dense theological architecture of the regime, clarifying for a wider audience the subtle yet momentous shifts in terms like *velāyat-e faqīh*. His analysis of its evolution from Khomeini's initial formulation to Khamenei's institutionalized "absolute" guardianship is the most lucid and rigorous available, revealing how jurisprudential adjustments have consistently served to expand and centralize state power.

[2] Kamrava, *How Islam Rules in Iran*, 2.

He contends, with characteristic precision, that ideas are the regime's most indispensable strategic asset. This argument starkly challenges traditional realist orthodoxies that render Iranian policy as mere Machiavellianism draped in religious garb. Second, Kamrava provides an exceptional empirical basis by drawing on massive Persian publications and original translations of discussions within the clerical establishment in Iran. Its third and perhaps most significant contribution is the formulation of "Khameneism" as a distinct political-theological project. A particularly illuminating aspect of Kamrava's work is his incisive reflection on the dynamic and multifaceted role of religious legitimacy. He notably asserts:

"Starting with the second term of the Ahmadinejad presidency in 2009, "Khameneism" became politically and ideologically dominant in Iran. Today, whatever this Khameneism is meant to signify is far from uncontested. But its political, ideological, and jurisprudential dimensions rule over the country. The absolute velayat-e faqih, a position devised and first occupied by Khomeini, has found its full expression during Khamenei's long tenure as Iran's leader."[3]

Beyond the Seminary: Unsettled Questions

While Kamrava's granular focus on the theological intricacies of elite discourse is a significant scholarly achievement, it also opens avenues for further inquiry. Even though his account is eloquent in the manner in which religious doctrines explain and justify political power, we gain some insight when we look at a more general reflection of the interaction between doctrinal thinking and geopolitical requirements in a broader sense. The recent geopolitical conflict between Iran and Israel is a clear image of how external strategic pressure can influence and subtly affect the interpretation of doctrines. Here, there is a fine but vital analytical tension: is theology the primary determinant of the political practice, or is it a clever, rhetorical device of decisions that have strategic imperatives?

Additionally, while Kamrava's treatment of theological discourse is insightful and thorough, one wonders if further engagement with broader societal dynamics might enrich the work even more substantially. An example is the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests that amount to a daunting grassroots challenge to the theological legitimacy of the state and underscore an essential dialectic between top-down power and potential bottom-up opposition. The incorporation of a greater depth of analysis of these interactions could perhaps provide an interesting extra layer, shedding more light on the finer dialectic between authority and dissent in modern Iran.

[3] Kamrava, *How Islam Rules in Iran*, 296.

Lastly, further comparative speculation on theological systems of governance beyond the Iranian borders might be used to give the book greater theoretical impact. Juxtaposing Iran's theological-political mechanisms with other forms of ideological authoritarianism can illuminate instructive parallels and contrasts. It would also deepen our understanding of how ideology functions universally as both a justification and a limitation of state power.

Conclusion

The arguments by Kamrava are especially urgent given the recent events, especially the increasing geopolitical tension between Iran and Israel. Tehran's responses to external threats, including the missile exchanges of June 2025, lend profound credibility to Kamrava's portrayal of doctrinal reasoning as integral to state decision-making processes. Yet, these crises simultaneously pose complex questions about the adaptability and elasticity of Iran's doctrinal frameworks under severe international pressure. Can theological justifications, firmly embedded within Kamrava's meticulously documented intellectual landscape, continuously sustain political legitimacy amid rising existential threats and mounting international isolation?

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