ST. ANTONY'S INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

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St. ANTONY'S INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

St. Antony's College, University of Oxford

STAIR is grateful to the dozens of volunteer peer reviewers whose insightful feedback has been an invaluabel contribution to the issue's quality.

Celebrating 20 years

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General Section

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Letter From the Editor

As a topic of inquiry, the 'rise of China' is as ubiquitous in the field of International Relations as the rise of yeast is in baking. Having already published two issues on China's ascent as a Great Power in two issues more than ten years apart, (issues 6.2 in 2011 and 17.1 in 2022), I must confess that we at STAIR had half a mind to abandon this topic altogether out of due self-awareness. However, in keeping with Issue 20.1 on the subject of Fascism, we are less interested in 'pinning the Cold War on the dragon,' as it were, and more interested in the ways in which hegemonic competition between China and the United States interpolates and configures in International Affairs more generally. A preoccupation with China and the United States as belligerents in a civilizational clash and teleological tango can be myopic, and even jingoistic. This issue is therefore not about US-China relations, but how their direct and indirect competition is a dimension of other issues in International Affairs, including the fate of the EU, Artificial Intelligence, trade wars, and other milieus.

In conjunction with Issue 20.1, this series has sought not merely to take stock of international affairs and global (geo)politics, but to do so in a way which asserts that we must embrace different narratives than those of twenty years ago. The world has not merely 'changed' since STAIR's founding - it has become, in some respects, unrecognizable if the lexicons, assumptions, and narratives of two decades ago are taken for granted. Put simply, we find ourselves unsure as to whether the term 'Cold War' is even appropriate any longer. A narrative of bipolar competition between paramount strategic hegemons in Asia and North America, one ostensibly socialist and the other capitalist, in the broader context of the rise of nation states once colonized by the West, with the threat of global destruction looming as a possible consequence of their co-escalation, cannot help but evoke memories of the Cold War. What I have noticed, however, working with STAIR's diligent editors on this issue, is that since we did not grow up during the Cold War, we understand that dichotomy in largely abstract ways having learned about it in school, as opposed to as an intuitive and internalized attribute of our social consciousness. We hazard the observation that those of our generation recognize the trope that 'the United States fights war for oil' as more sensible and self-explanatory than 'the United States fights wars to contain socialism,' for instance. Perhaps we are

less cognizant of the ideological narratives that shape International Affairs, and thus assume that decontextualized 'interests' are the signal and 'beliefs' are the noise.
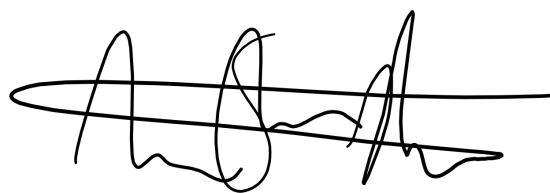
We can be persuaded that notwithstanding the 'multipolarity' which characterizes our age, a degree of strategic clarity has (re)emerged in International Affairs. What does not seem as intuitive to us are the extent to which the assumed friend-enemy distinctions which drive decision-making in international affairs are as coherent as we would expect of the kind of civilizational conflict often associated with the Cold War. Speaking for myself, I can attest as a Canadian, however anecdotally, that the sudden surge in patriotic identification following the imposition of tariffs on Canada by the United States varied independently, and certainly did not compromise, Canadian enmity towards China or Russia in the context of our fears of their incursion upon our interests in the Arctic, or their alleged espionage and interference in our elections, among other issues. As much as we continue to regard the United States as an ally, we also continue to boycott American products when it is convenient, whereas Chinese products tend to escape unharmed and unnoticed.

The hard work and talent of STAIR's editors and contributors deserves recognition. Bosco and Noah, your work on the Theme Section was exemplary, and has set a standard for future issues. Your knowledge of the subject matter, broad and deep, expertly informed the selection of pieces, the identification of peer reviewers, and the feedback returned to authors. Elena and Theo, the podcast continues to come close to outshining the journal itself as our preferred source of content. You have made the podcast into a truly professional production and have done so with a relieving independence. STAIR owes a special debt of thanks to Ismail, who stepped in at a critical juncture as Production Editor, producing the covers and contents for 20.1 and 20.2. Your decisive refashioning of STAIR's entire production process has been the only truly smooth step in our transition to Open Access publication.

Finally, to Yacine, I wish the best of luck as Editor in Chief for the coming year. Having done more than your share on the General Section of both of this year's issues, I am confident that the journal is in the best hands. Feel free to make good use of me at your leisure as I join the Steering Committee as an alumnus. I can't wait to see where you take STAIR as it begins the third decade of its journey. And, as always, my thanks to the reader for reading the work of the incredible authors included herein, now in open access format.

Sincerely,

Armin Safavi, Editor in Chief

THEME
SECTION

THEME SECTION INTRODUCTION

"The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: Now is the time of monsters." This famous quote by Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci seems apt in describing the critical juncture faced by today's world. The markers of the old, post-Cold War order are eroding across multiple dimensions. The United States achieved unipolarity after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, but U.S. supremacy is rapidly ceding ground to a more complex multipolar world. Regional powers like China, India, and a resurgent Russia are creating alternative international groupings, including BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, to challenge Western-led norms and institutions. The "rules-based" international order is under tremendous strain, proving toothless in restraining great power politics. The economic pillars of the Western liberal order are also under duress, with the United States, its primary architect, turning its back on globalisation with punishing tariffs. Meanwhile, democracy, once seen as an ascendant political model, is under attack from both the left and right, primarily due to its perceived inability to address economic dislocation and rising inequality.

While the decay of the old order is evident, a distinct new order has yet to emerge. With a history of excellence in regional studies and social science, St. Antony's College—the home of this journal for twenty years—has long contributed to envisioning the future of the international order. In St. Antony's College's inaugural Margaret MacMillan North American lecture, Richard Haass, president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, outlined several possibilities for how Gramscian "monsters" would jostle in a world beyond Pax Americana. These included a U.S. attempt to restore its primacy, the transition of global leadership to another power, the division of the world into spheres of influence, or descent into chaos and disorder. These possibilities offer much to consider as we anticipate and shape the new world we are entering.

Still, scholars struggle to define and agree on precise analytical categories to summarise these concurrent dynamics. Among the labels applied, the "New Cold War" framing has been invoked so frequently that it has its own Wikipedia page. Its most recent rendition refers to the increasingly contentious relationship between the United States and

China. This pairing parallels certain dynamics during the Cold War: two superpowers have deep disagreements over economic order, international security, and political system, but their sizeable nuclear arsenals prevent them from engaging in a direct military conflict. While the historical comparison has obvious deficiencies—such as its failure to capture today's complex interdependence in the global economy—it is a good starting point for making the present moment somewhat tractable. The theme of this issue, The New Cold War?, was designed to help organise debates about the current geopolitical moment around a common, albeit contested, set of analytic tools developed from a critical period of world history. Recognising that this framing is in no way perfect or uncontested, we have chosen to add a question mark to this issue's title to avoid asserting this reality and to invite a genuine debate on whether a contemporary cold war is in fact happening.

The research articles in this issue capture different dynamics of this emerging geopolitical reality, covering nuclear stability, technological competition, trade, ideology, and maritime security. To varying degrees, they adopt the "New Cold War" analogy while contending with its benefits and limitations. Linda van der Horst and Qiyang Niu argue that traditional and reformist strategic stability frameworks are no longer adequate in today's new geopolitical climate. The former, rooted in a bipolar context, fails to account for today's multipolar dynamics, while the latter overcorrects by focusing too heavily on non-traditional threats. Compounding these theoretical issues, the erosion of arms control agreements and the rise of disruptive technologies have rendered old approaches untenable. Van der Horst and Niu take a pragmatic approach to managing strategic stability, proposing that practitioners focus on factors like timing, dialogue formats, sequencing, diplomatic orchestration, and inclusivity. In taking this practitioner's perspective, their contribution paves the way for a new generation of great-power arms control.

As van der Horst and Niu allude to, the rise of new technologies has become a major vector of instability in today's age. In particular, artificial intelligence (AI) has become a focal point of U.S.-China competition, especially after Chinese developer DeepSeek released large-language models with capabilities rivalling those of U.S. counterparts earlier this year. Richard Heeks and Yujia He's contribution tackles head-on the role of AI in shaping today's geopolitical order. They organise the scholarly discourse on global AI development into two broad camps. On the one hand, affirmative uses of the "AI Cold War" framing are driven primarily by an understanding of AI innovation as indispensable to national security. On the other hand, opponents of the "AI Cold War" narrative warn that the framing is exploited by tech and defence firms to discourage government AI regulations, reinforce militarisation dynamics, and undermine international research and regulatory cooperation. To overcome the deficiencies underscored by critics, future research, Heeks and He argue, should extend beyond the binary U.S.-China framing, devoting more attention instead to the AI development strategies of third-party countries, including those from the Global South.

This critical review of the "AI Cold War" literature reminds us that just as the Cold War was never only about the US and the Soviet Union, today's emerging world order also involves third countries trying to secure their own interests amidst competing

demands from the two superpowers. Based on this crucial insight, Daniel Thumpston approaches understanding the U.S.-China cold war from the European Union's (EU) perspective. He argues that the "strategic triangle" concept can illuminate the logic of interaction between the US, China, and the EU. The US-Japan-EU Trilateral Meeting of Trade Ministers (TMTM) and the EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC) are best understood as efforts to bind the US and EU together in their common strategy to counter China's strengths in global trade. Crucially, the EU was not simply bandwagoning with the US's preferred policies; it has developed a sophisticated strategy to hedge against a potentially unreliable transatlantic partner and retain avenues of economic cooperation with China.

In addition to third-country agency, ideology is another salient dimension of today's geopolitics that deserves further research. Observers may assume that the current U.S.-China dynamic, even if framed as a contest between democracy and authoritarianism, lacks the same universal, ideological grandeur of the first Cold War. Mark Juergensmeyer's insightful contribution challenges this assumption by highlighting that the conflict is not a retreat from ideology, but a shift in its nature. As he notes, the liberal order is founded on "secular nationalism," a political model that separates state and religion. The rise of "religious nationalism"—which uses religious worldviews to anchor the modern nation-state—represents a direct challenge to this foundation. If the new Cold War is a contest between autocracy and democracy, then religious nationalism "plays a significant role in buttressing the power and providing the mobilising force of dictatorial regimes in the emerging global conflict of the present." This is seen in Vladimir Putin's reliance on the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution in Iran. The influence of religious nationalism is even felt within democracies, with Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalism in India and Donald Trump's strong support from U.S. evangelical protestants challenging the centrality of secular democracy to a modern state.

Maritime security is a highly contested theatre in today's fraught geopolitics. China's naval expansion and increasing assertiveness in maritime affairs threaten to challenge US primacy as a Pacific power. Much of the conversation around the motivations behind Beijing's build-up relies on two common theories: threat environment theory and economic security. In his contribution, Owen Au complements these theories by utilising the concept of "naval nationalism:" the use of naval power not just for deterrence or trade protection, but as a tool for domestic legitimacy and nationalist identity. Au argues that while threat-based and economic theories capture important elements of China's motivations, they fail to appreciate the symbolic and political weight that Beijing assigns to its navy. Au's discussion provides a powerful lens for understanding how China envisions its place in the world and how it seeks to assert that vision in the maritime domain.

Alongside the peer-reviewed articles, our Interview section adds greater depth to the issue's theme. In the Interview section, we are grateful to Professor Barry Buzan and Professor Jennifer Lind for their thoughts on today's international order. Whereas Professor Lind favours viewing today's world through the lens of polarity rather than the Cold War analogy, Professor Buzan believes there is value in applying the "cold war"

as a general concept. Professor Buzan's discussion of the English school perspective—arguing that the main story today is not U.S.-China power transition, but "the end of the Western-led world order and the emergence of a second round of modernity"—provides a useful corrective to the fixation on great power competition prevalent in academia and the media.

Last but not least, we are immensely honoured to publish an address by the Honourable Dr. Kevin Rudd on the 20th Anniversary of the Department of Area Studies at the University of Oxford. A former Australian Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and diplomat, Dr. Rudd provides a compelling analysis of how the academic study of international affairs can be harnessed for both its descriptive and prescriptive value. He argues that area studies is the "natural academic bedfellow" of foreign policy practitioners, helping them understand how other nations view the world by synthesising insights about a country's geography, history, culture, and political systems, as well as the domestic agendas of its leaders. Dr. Rudd then demonstrates how this discipline offers insights into Xi Jinping's worldview and actions, and consequently, the trajectory of U.S.-China relations. Highlighting the promise of education and learning, Dr. Rudd inspires our confidence in navigating what he calls a "decade of living dangerously."

While the articles and essays in this issue do not offer a conclusive statement on how to characterise this emerging international order, it is our sincere hope that they will contribute to the ongoing debates and continue the tradition of St. Antony's College of not just engaging in scholarly analysis of the past and present, but also in actively shaping our understanding of the future. We hope you will find it illuminating.

Brian Kot and Noah Smith

Managing and Theme Section Editors

Nationalism at Sea: Rethinking China's Naval Expansion Since the 1980s

Owen Au

Abstract: *China's dramatic naval expansion and increasing assertiveness in maritime affairs over recent decades mark a significant departure from its historically continental strategic orientation. Chinese strategists and experts often attribute this transformation to a shifting threat environment and growing economic interdependence with maritime trade since the launch of economic reforms in 1978 and the end of the Cold War in 1991. While both factors held explanatory value in the late 20th century, their relevance has diminished since the 2010s, and remains insufficient to account for China's continued pursuit of a carrier-based, blue-water navy capable of global power projection. Drawing on Robert Ross's concept of naval nationalism, this paper offers a complementary perspective to these conventional explanations. Through a critical analysis of China's strategic behaviour from the 1980s to the present, this paper argues that naval nationalism has been a consistent—though not exclusive—driving force behind China's naval development. Its influence is closely tied to Beijing's perception of its global position: the more China perceives itself as occupying a strong position or operating within a favourable international environment, the more salient naval nationalism becomes in shaping its maritime strategy. Fuelled by nationalist sentiment and symbolized by aircraft carriers and far-sea operations, China's ambition to become a global sea power is increasingly accompanied by a determination to "reclaim" its maritime territory and challenge US naval dominance in the Western Pacifi*

Despite the political polarization in the United States, perhaps one of the few issues that can draw consensus from both Republicans and Democrats is the strategic priority toward China. Both the Trump and Biden administrations have been determined to confront China by strengthening the US naval presence in the Western Pacific,[1] which is reasonable given China's shocking pace in building up its naval strength. While the US has long been the leading naval power, China has been rapidly expanding its navy over the last decades. In 2022, the number of Chinese active warships surpassed that   of the US, and China is currently operating the world's largest navy.[2] Although the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) still lags behind the US in terms of total tonnage, according to some naval intelligence, China's ships are increasingly of comparable quality to those of the US.[3]

While China grows more confident in its expanding naval capability, in addition to its most notable assertive operations over disputed regions in the East China Sea, Taiwan, and the South China Sea,[4] the country is also more eager to send its fleet beyond its

immediate maritime region. In February 2025, China's unnoticed live-fire military drill in the waters between Australia and New Zealand showcased both the country's ability and willingness to project its power to distant regions.[5]

Though historically a continental power, China is now directing its security focus seaward, determined to challenge the US maritime dominance that has prevailed since the end of the Second World War. It is no coincidence that, despite bordering fourteen countries along its over 22,000km land border, China appears to be more assertive in maritime disputes.

This paper examines the factors that have been driving China's maritime ambition and naval expansion since the 1980s. The following section examines two key factors, often highlighted by Chinese naval strategists and experts, that explain China's shift in security focus toward the sea. The first widely cited factor is the changing threat environment, which compels China to focus more on potential threats from the sea. The second is economic: since the 1978 economic reforms, China's integration with the maritime economy has made it necessary to protect its expanding sea lines of communications (SLOCs) to safeguard its economic and energy security. While these two factors hold some explanatory power, they both nonetheless show weakness, with their explanatory power starting to fade in the 2010s.

The latter part of this paper will examine how naval nationalism has been a consistent, though not exclusive, driving force behind China's naval development since the 1980s and has played an incrementally prominent role since the early 2010s. As conceptualized by Robert Ross, naval nationalism refers to nationalist "prestige strategies" to enhance the regime's domestic legitimacy by satisfying the nation's self-perception as a great power.[6] While Ross laid the conceptual framework of naval nationalism, he did not fully contextualize it in the case of China. In particular, he did not examine what factors, beyond the personal ambitions of autocratic leaders,[7] support China's naval nationalism, nor how its significance in the country's strategic thinking has varied across different periods. This paper argues that naval nationalism stems from China's desire to project itself as a great power, but its influence on naval development depends on how Beijing perceives its global position. The stronger or more favourable China views its international environment, the more dominant naval nationalism becomes in shaping its maritime strategy and naval development.

Evaluating Conventional Explanations

This section will examine two factors that are widely used, especially among Chinese strategists, to explain or justify China's shifting strategic focus toward maritime affairs, and therefore the country's rapid expansion of PLAN, over the last decades. The first factor is what I call the threat environment theory, and the second factor is economic security.

Threat Environment Theory

The threat environment theory suggests that China's shifting strategic focus toward the sea was mainly driven by the change in the geopolitical landscape in East Asia since the end of the Cold War, and that the development of the PLAN as an essential response

to the country's evolving threat environment. As pointed out by a PLAN strategist, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 provided "historical opportunities" for China as it eliminated the nation's greatest continental security threat at the time.[8] In the decade following, China successively settled its border disputes with neighbouring countries and signed a "Friendship Cooperation Treaty" with Russia, leading to a period when the security environment of its land border was seen in the country as "the best in China's history."[9] As a result, China could safely reallocate more resources and security focus on the sea.

At the same time, China found itself facing a different geopolitical challenge—expanding US hegemony as a unipolar power. Following the end of the Cold War, the US sought to secure its global dominance through a series of military interventions and destabilizing acts, which the research institute of the PLA even calls "the root causes of contemporary warfare."[10] Similar concern was also expressed by the Chinese government, which stated in 1998 that the US's "expanding military bloc and strengthening military alliance create uncertainty for international security."[11] At a 2005 Peking University seminar attended by over 20 prominent Chinese scholars, experts, and officials, participants agreed that while the US sought to maintain global hegemony, "China must prepare for the US's persistent attempt to suppress China."[12]

During the same period, the political development in Taiwan was another nerve-touching issue for China. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Beijing has persistently claimed sovereignty of Taiwan. The island, at the time, was under control of the Kuomintang (KMT) which was defeated by the CCP during the Chinese civil war, and thus viewed by the PRC as part of its territory yet to be "reunified." In the 1990s, Taiwan underwent a democratic transition, which was seen by authoritarian China as a "separatist" initiative to "make Taiwan an independent political entity."[13] Meanwhile, Lee Teng-hui, Taiwan's first democratically elected president, advocated for the "Two-state theory" and refused to endorse the "One China Principle." Beijing perceived this move as a rejection of China's proposal for "peaceful reunification," contributing to China's belief that it had to respond forcefully.[14] However, Beijing's attempt to deter the "separatists" in Taiwan through large-scale military exercises and missile launches received counter-deterrence responses from the US. As observed by Ian McCaslin and Andrew Erickson, China's inability to respond to the US deployment of two aircraft carriers to waters off the Chinese coast during the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996 pressed Chinese leadership to increase funding for PLAN modernization.[15]

As China began to perceive its primary source of threat shifting from land to sea, its coastal regions simultaneously emerged as strategically vital yet increasingly vulnerable to maritime threats. Under Deng Xiaoping's policy of "allowing some to get rich first"(让一部分人先富起来),[16] China prioritized the modernization and urbanization of its densely populated coastal regions. These areas were designed to serve as the country's economic gateway to global markets, pooling together factories, cheap labour, and well-developed infrastructure.[17] This strategy successfully attracted foreign direct investment (FDI), which played a pivotal role in capital formation and economic growth. Subsequently, by the early 1990s, the coastal regions accounted for about 90% of China's

FDI projects.[18] Wu Zhengyu from the Renmin University of China observed, one of the motives behind China's drive to develop sea power was to "expand its strategic depth in the Western Pacific, and thereby maximize the security of China's most economically vibrant eastern region."[19] Another Chinese strategist even asserted that, "if Taiwan and other islands are not within China's control, China will not be able to guarantee the border security of commercial centres such as Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen."[20]

In short, with the changing geopolitical landscape in the post-Cold War 1990s, marked by the collapse of the Soviet Union, successive settlements of land border disputes with its neighbours, expansion of US hegemony, and the deteriorating relationship with Taipei, the threat environment theory suggests that China's major security threats were no longer from its land border, but from the sea. Meanwhile, after a decade of economic reform, China's flourishing coastal regions became vital to the country's economy, such that any attack on those regions from the sea would be devastating. As a result, China's shift in security focus toward the sea and its naval buildup were a response to the change in threat environment.

This argument is convincing in that it was largely compatible with the trajectory of the development of China's naval strategy in the late 20th century. At the time when China's economy started to surge under Deng's economic reform, the PLAN was still adopting the strategy of "coastal defense" (海岸防御) as directed by Mao Zedong since the early years of the establishment of the PRC.[21] The role of the PLAN in the military throughout the early decades of the PRC was largely as a supporter to the PLA ground force,[22] such that some may see the strategy of "coastal defense" as a "limited extent of ground operation" rather than a genuine naval operation.[23] In the early years of economic reform, Deng still used "coastal defense" as the navy's guiding principle,[24] but this began to change in the mid-1980s.

In 1983, Liu Huaqing, then Commander of PLAN, proposed the revised naval strategy of "active defense and near-sea operations" (积极防御，近海作战), which was later refined in 1985 as "near-sea active defense," also sometimes referred to as "near-sea defense."[25] As categorized by Liu, "near-sea defense" is a "regional defensive strategy" (区域防御型战略), marking a departure from China's traditional "coastal defense" strategy.[26] While "coastal defense" is a ground-based operation focused on securing China's shoreline, "near-sea defense" aims to create a buffer zone across the broader maritime region. Recognizing the economic vulnerability of China's coastal regions, Liu sought to keep potential conflict zones at a safe distance from these economic hubs.

Liu's proposal was officially endorsed by Deng in 1985; the year China normalized its relations with the Soviet Union.[27] The vitality of "near-sea defense" as PLAN's primary strategy was further consolidated due to Liu's subsequent elevation to the Central Military Commission and the CCP Politburo Standing Committee in the 1990s. Even after Liu retired, "near-sea defense" remained central to the country's strategic thinking. Subsequently, throughout the 2000s, advancing the capability of "near-sea defense" had been one of the primary tasks for the PLAN.[28]

While the strategy of "near-sea defense" had been dominant at the time, China's naval strategy has never been purely about "near-sea defense," with its centrality starting to fade by the end of the 2010s. Since 2008, developing a capability to operate in the far-sea has been another major task for the PLAN alongside "near-sea defense."[29] Meanwhile, discussion in China regarding the construction of a blue-water navy and an aircraft carrier became popular,[30] such that China eventually launched its first aircraft carrier in 2012.

As pointed out by Robert Ross, it is unnecessary for a country to develop a carrier-based blue-water navy to protect its maritime security in its immediate waters, as it is far less cost-effective than focusing its resources on advancing its submarine-based access-denial capability.[31] While the strategy of "near-sea defense" addressed the new threat environment by denying potential invaders access to China's coastal regions, the subsequent emphasis on "far-sea protection" clearly deviated from this strategic purpose.

In parallel to his proposal of "near-sea defense," significant efforts were also made by Liu to advocate for the construction of an aircraft carrier, such that he was also known as the "Father of the Chinese Aircraft Carrier."[32] Although the Chinese leadership had not been publicly vocal regarding aircraft carriers until the late 2000s, studies found that as early as the mid-1990s, President Jiang Zemin had already quietly approved the research and development of China's capability to build an aircraft carrier.[33] Even at the time when the trajectory of Chinese naval development was largely in line with the evolving threat environment in the late 20th century, Chinese naval strategists believed the country's navy should do more than just respond to the threat environment.

One risk of overly stressing the threat environment theory is that it may lead to an oversight of China's overall attitude toward territorial disputes. While diplomatic efforts were made by China throughout the 1990s to settle its border disputes and to improve relationships with its land neighbours, similar efforts were also made regarding its maritime neighbours. As a signal to show its willingness to uphold the international maritime order, China ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1996. Meanwhile, a series of bilateral negotiations with other claimants of the South China Sea also took place during the period.[34] Most notably, China reached an agreement with Vietnam in 2000, establishing a mutually agreed maritime boundary in the Tonkin Gulf, which some even saw as "a model of conflict resolution."[35]

It is also an overstatement to say China has well-settled its border disputes with its land neighbours. For example, China continues to have several unresolved border disputes with India and Bhutan.[36] Interestingly, compared to China's attitude and behaviour when dealing with disputes on the sea, it appears more restrained regarding disputes on land. Despite China and India occasionally engaging in border clashes, those clashes rarely escalated seriously[37] and were settled in line with the Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures both countries signed in 1996, which explicitly prohibited the use of guns and bombs along the Line of Actual Control.[38]

Therefore, it is fair to say that instead of the lack of disputes on land allowing China

to shift its focus to the sea, it is more likely the case that China chooses to be more assertive in maritime disputes while keeping those on land latent. As Ross observed, border disputes are not the cause of security conflicts, but rather "security conflicts cause border disputes."[39] While it is true that the geopolitical development by the end of the 20th century marked a relief in China's land-based security threat, and, at least to some extent, a relatively more unfriendly environment on the sea, China did take part in that change of environment.

Economic Security

Another commonly discussed factor besides the threat environment theory is the significance of China's maritime security to its economic security. In addition to the growing economic significance of the coastal regions, another effect of China's economic reform since 1978 is the integration of the country's economy into the global market. Benefiting from its vast supply of cheap labour and lax industrial regulations in the 1980s, China rapidly developed as the world's largest manufacturer, often being referred to as the "world's factory,"[40] exporting manufactured goods across the globe. Following the announcement of the "Go Global" strategy (走出去) in 1999, which encouraged Chinese enterprises to seek markets abroad, and China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, exports further emerged to become an unshakable pillar of China's economic growth.[41]

At the same time, China's energy demand was also on the rapid rise. By the mid-1990s, China's energy consumption had doubled from the time when economic reform began, while the population growth during the same period was just about 8%.[42] The expansion in China's energy demand was mainly driven by the continued expansion of the manufacturing sector, which accounted for more than half of the country's total energy consumption.[43] In response to its growing energy demand, the country also found itself increasingly reliant on imported oil. Since 2006, China has been a net importer of oil.[44]

Given China's growing reliance on access to global markets, as well as imported energy, maritime security became more vital to the country's economic security. It is estimated that over 80% of global trade by volume and 70% by value is conducted via maritime transport.[45] As coastal regions were designed to be the engine of China's export-oriented economy under economic reform, maritime trade is even more relevant in China, such that over 90% of the country's international trade depends on maritime transport.[46] As another indicator demonstrating the significance of maritime trade to China, as of 2023, seven of the world's top ten busiest ports were in China, accounting for a quarter of global maritime traffic.[47]

The economic reliance on maritime access has long been stressed by Chinese naval strategists. After studying different naval theories, Liu Huaqing admitted that he was particularly convinced by Mahan's belief that a strong navy which can exclusively command over strategically important SLOCs is imperative to a country's prosperity and national strength.[48] Consequently, "to effectively and timely control over SLOCs nearby China's maritime region" became one of the major thoughts when designing his "near-sea defense" strategy.[49] For decades since then, the belief that there is an essential linkage between China's economy and SLOC security has been widely shared by the

Chinese leadership and strategists. In 2011, a Senior Captain of the PLAN published a book, On Maritime Strategic Access, systematically theorizing the importance of SLOCs to China's national interests, by which she asserted that since "China's economic external dependence is increasing year by year, maintaining the security of strategic SLOCs is related to the maintenance and expansion of the national interests [...] and has become a major strategic concern of the Party and the State."[50] As observed by a Taiwanese expert, the book reflected that "the Chinese leadership has a certain level of expectation toward strategic SLOCs," and the subsequent Maritime Silk Road initiative advocated by Xi Jinping in 2013 "puts the theory of strategic SLOCs into practice."[51]

However, similar to that of the threat environment theory, while the linkage between China's maritime security and economic development is evident, the vitality of maritime trade should not be overstated. As shown in Figure 1, although the weight of exports to China's GDP was in general climbing since 1978, and accounted for a third of the country's GDP in the mid-2000s, its importance has declined thereafter. The sharp decline in 2008 was indeed contributed by the shrinking international consumption market due to the global financial crisis that year. Following the financial crisis, the Chinese leadership realized the risk of being overly reliant on foreign markets, and efforts were made to boost domestic consumption throughout the 2010s.[52] By the end of the 2010s, geopolitical tension with the US had continued to grow. As the US was one of China's major foreign markets, this tension led Xi Jinping to direct further reforms. In 2020, Xi initiated a "dual circulation" strategy, which attempted to make the country's domestic demand and innovation the primary driver of the economy while keeping foreign markets and investors as a secondary driver.[53] Due to uncertainty in the global trading system following the COVID-19 pandemic and the global trade war in 2025, there is currently a prevalent sentiment of trade protectionism worldwide; it is reasonable to expect that China is seeking to further reduce economic reliance on foreign markets.[54]
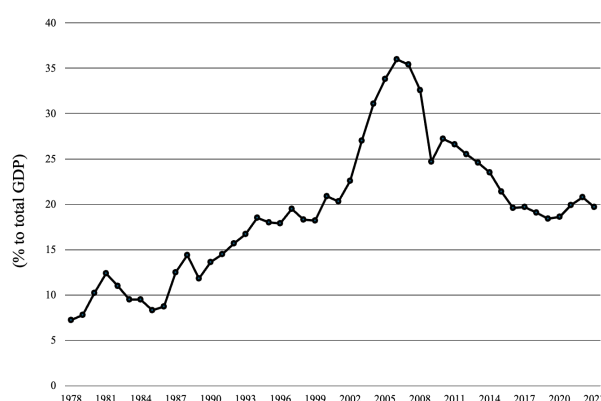
Figure 1: China's exports of goods and services (1978-2023)

Additionally, China's energy reliance on maritime access is also prone to overstatement. For decades, coal, rather than oil, has been China's major energy source. While coal accounts for over 60% of China's energy supply, oil accounts for no more than 18%.[55] Being the world's largest coal producer, China's coal is largely domestically supplied.[56] Despite being a net coal importer since 2009 due to the country's surging energy demand, imported coal only accounts for a small portion of China's coal consumption, with most imported from neighbouring countries like Indonesia, Russia, and Australia, which do not necessarily involve SLOCs in the far-sea.[57]

As for oil, the Middle East was traditionally the major source of China's oil. However, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia, where maritime logistics are not required, has emerged as China's major source of oil, marking a relative decline

in China's reliance on oil from the Middle East.[58] In the meantime, as China is in the process of energy transition: many sectors that used to rely exclusively on oil are gradually being transformed. As indicated by many observers, while China is boosting its electric vehicles (EV) industry, traditional fossil fuel vehicles are being displaced at an accelerating pace, which has already led to a decline in the country's oil demand.[59]

Despite economic security having long been an argument taken by Chinese strategists and officials to stress the strategic significance of maritime security and SLOCs to the country, the strategic value of the sea from an economic perspective is exaggerated. With Xi Jinping's goal to make the country's economy more self-reliant, the relevance of economic security to China's maritime ambition has been fading over the last decade. It is not to say that economic security has never been a genuine factor in China's naval strategic thinking—specially before 2008, when the significance of exports to China's economic growth was too evident—but as both China's economic growth and energy security are now less reliant on SLOCs in the far seas, the argument of economic security is more and more unconvincing.

Naval Nationalism: A Complementary Lens

Both threat environment theory and economic security can only partly explain China's naval development in certain periods of time, and both are unable to justify the need to consume vast resources to develop a carrier-based blue-water navy for far-sea operations instead of focusing on its "near-sea defense" capability. As argued in the latter part of this paper, China's maritime ambition and naval expansion can only make sense with the complementary explanation of naval nationalism. This does not mean that China's maritime ambition and naval expansion can exclusively be explained by naval nationalism, as it is clear that other factors, including threat environment theory and economic security, also contribute to China's strategic thinking and naval development. Rather, naval nationalism is a complement, which has consistently contributed to China's naval development since the 1980s, while the level of influence varied across different periods of time.

Referencing Robert Ross's discussion on the concept, this paper adopts his understanding of naval nationalism as nationalist "prestige strategies" to enhance the regime's domestic legitimacy by satisfying the nation's self-perception as a great power.[60] However, as Ross didn't explicitly define the concept,[61] this paper will list some characteristics of naval nationalism, followed by contextualizing the relevance of the concept in the specific case of China.

First, the military is often considered as a symbol of national strength, which is often applied as an effective tool to arouse national pride in the people, and therefore cement the leadership of the nation. There are substantial studies demonstrating the positive correlation between the development of military strength and the construction of nationalism,[62] with some scholars arguing that military culture can provide a "significant and long-lasting influence" on the development of national identity in a modern context.[63] The navy, as an essential part of the military strength, can also serve as a nationalist tool to consolidate national identity.

One characteristic that makes the navy stand out from other military branches is its diplomatic facet. It is agreed that in the modern context, the nature of the navy as a military branch has already departed from its military origin, such that it is more often used to serve diplomatic purposes during peace-time or crisis by sending political signals to other countries.[64] Due to the cost and military implications of naval deployment, deploying a navy is thus seen to be a "credible means of signaling," which could give the country more leverage in international politics especially when powerful and highly-visible vessels, namely aircraft carriers, are deployed.[65] For example, during the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996, the US deployment of two aircraft carriers to the Taiwan Strait was a strong signal sent not only to China, but also to Taiwan and other US allies in the region, as well as to Americans, demonstrating the US security commitment and its military supremacy in the Western Pacific.

Therefore, a visibly powerful navy is not only a military asset to a country, but also a diplomatic asset[66] which can in turn also be translated as fuel for national pride by presenting a sense of "international success" to its people.[67] When advocating for the construction of a Chinese aircraft carrier, Liu Huaqing was apparently an active supporter of such a perspective, believing that a carrier would enhance the country's political influence, as well as raise its "military and national prestige."[68] Such a perspective is echoed by many Chinese strategists, with some stressing that the navy has "an important international role because naval vessels are symbols of state power and authority," and therefore the mission of the naval forces is not to be limited to "near-sea defense."[69] As a result, some experts concluded that having a strong navy with capability to project power globally has naturally been "the 'blue dream' of every great power since technology made such fleets possible."[70]

In the Chinese context, naval strength also has another meaning. Within China's official narrative, the long period between the outbreak of the first Opium War in 1839 and the end of the Second World War in 1945 is often referred to as the "century of humiliation," a period when China had been repeatedly "invaded and suppressed" by imperial powers.[71] While this sense of humiliation has long served as a vital political motivation in China, over the last decade, it has been frequently cited as an important source to justify the necessity of Xi Jinping's "China's dream" and "national rejuvenation" visions.[72] During the "century of humiliation," China was mostly invaded by sea, and it successively lost its coastal regions. An article in Chinese state media writes that throughout the "century of humiliation," China suffered "470 invasions from the sea [...] leaving an unforgettable shame on the Chinese nation," and China's naval strength is therefore "a matter of the survival of the state and the nation."[73] Similarly an article published by the PLA media states that "during the century of humiliation, China had been invaded by foreign powers from the sea several hundred times [...] deeply confirming the unwavering rule: embracing the sea would lead to prosperity, giving up the sea would lead to decline."[74] One expert notes that the Chinese "deep-rooted desire" to recover from the national humiliation is something that "should not be underestimated."[75]

The nationalist sentiment has grown important to the Chinese leadership ever since the economic reform began. The communist ideology had essentially served as an indispensable source of the Communist Party's leadership since the Civil War, which

was even explicitly praised as the central component of the PLA's military doctrine under the Maoist era.[76] Following the death of Mao and Deng's assumption of power in the late 1970s, however, the party-state officially gave up its emphasis on the communist ideology and focused on national development and modernization. Since then, economic growth and national strength have become the vital source of legitimacy for the Chinese leadership.[77]

As China emerged as a great power with rising international status, naval strength, as a demonstrative symbol of national strength, also received considerable attention. In 2019, the Academy of Ocean of China published an article with the title "Build a Strong Navy Commensurate with China's Role," stating that as "China is entering a new period of 'from big to strong' [...] the country's development and security interests call for a strong blue-water navy" which "should have the capability to project our sea power to any maritime regions in the world."[78] A state media article from the same period also argued that it is necessary for China to develop a carrier-based blue-water navy because an aircraft carrier is a "manifestation of a country's comprehensive strength, and also a military symbol of great power status [and it] does not match China's national strength if the country does not have an aircraft carrier."[79] With the Chinese desire, and eventual success, to develop the country as a strong nation with global influence, the desire to possess a strong navy capable of global projection has also become too much to ignore.

Despite the growing emphasis on a blue-water navy, this nationalist perspective also drives the country to perceive the necessity of asserting its claims over disputed maritime territories in the near-sea, in addition to actual security considerations. First, it essentially satisfies the nationalist desire to recover from the national humiliation. As claimed in the Chinese official narrative, those disputed maritime regions, including the Senkaku Islands, Taiwan, and the South China Sea, have been "China's territory since time immemorial," which were invaded and occupied by foreign forces during the century of humiliation.[80] Since China is no longer a weak state that can be suppressed by foreign powers, it is therefore necessary for the country to "reclaim" and to "defend [these] 'Chinese territory' from foreign encroachment," which "appeals to political and emotional sensibilities."[81]

Another layer in these territorial disputes is their strategic value to the ambition of global projection. As shown in Map 1, despite having a long coastline, China's near-sea is geographically surrounded by peninsular, island, and archipelagic nations. Most notably, as often referred to by Chinese strategists, the country's maritime access is contained by the US "first island chain," stretching from South Korea and Japan at its northernmost, passing through the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Singapore at its southernmost.[82] It is therefore a prerequisite for China to control these maritime regions, in order to secure its naval deploy to the far sea without the risk of being blocked in by the island chain. Taiwan, as the closest island among the island chain to the Chinese continent, is particularly valuable in the sense that it would naturally dismiss the containment effect of the island chain if China could seize and set up a military base on the island.

Therefore, from the perspective of naval nationalism, China's assertive claims in the near

sea and its naval ambition of global projection are not two diverging issues but are instead intertwined. As China's naval development and maritime strategy have been influenced by naval nationalism, the level to which naval nationalism influences varies across different periods, and is primarily determined by Beijing's perception of its national strength relative to that of the international environment and balance of power.[83] The more Beijing
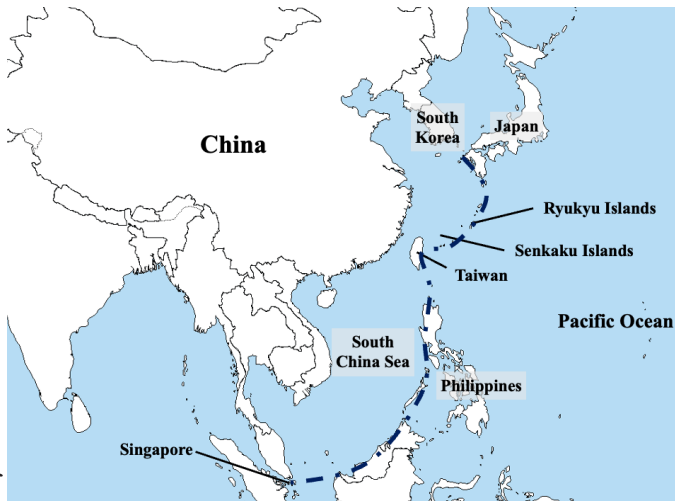
Map 1: China "contained" by the "first island chain"

perceives itself as enjoying a strong position or a friendly international environment, the more influential naval nationalism is, and vice versa.

Historical Stages of China's Naval Nationalism

The 1980s was perhaps the period when the international environment was most favourable to the PRC, therefore also marking the first historical stage of its naval nationalism since its establishment. When Liu Huaqing initiated the advancement of naval strategy and modernization of the PLAN, China had normalized its diplomatic relations with both the US and the Soviet Union. As China's economy and naval capabilities began to surge, it also appeared more assertive regarding its maritime claims, particularly in the South China Sea. During this period, China advanced its naval presence from the Paracel Islands to the Spratly Islands, followed by the construction of permanent structures on the reefs and naval patrols. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea throughout the 1980s was seen to be emboldened by the "minimal adverse international reaction."[84] While great powers, namely the US and the Soviet Union, remained silent, regional countries in Southeast Asia also failed to take meaningful joint action to push back against China.

In sharp contrast, the 1990s began with a significant backlash in the international environment for China. Following the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, China faced severe international sanctions initiated by the US, leading to rapidly deteriorating US–China relations and a diplomatically isolated China. After that, the Gulf War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 demonstrated the political and military supremacy of the US. These incidents collectively, referred to by Rush Doshi as the "traumatic trifecta,"[85] led to a sense of an inferior international status in China. This was especially vivid when the size of the US economy at that time was nearly 17 times that of China's. Subsequently, China became more restrained not only diplomatically but also in maritime affairs. As discussed earlier, throughout the 1990s, China not only worked on resolving its border disputes with land neighbours but also attempted to improve relationships with maritime neighbours by presenting a more cooperative attitude toward maritime disputes. Even during the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996, while China behaved aggressively toward Taiwan, it immediately stepped back after US naval intervention.

However, China would soon find itself in a better position entering the 21st century, with accession to the WTO marking a significant step in China's rising international status. During the 16th Party Congress in 2002, President Hu Jintao stated that "with the development of China's economy and the enhancement of our comprehensive national strength [...] China would be more flexible and confident in handling China–US relations."[86] The gradual shift in foreign policy was also translated into growing confidence surrounding the navy. As Beijing officially acknowledged in the early 2000s that the PLAN had already achieved the capability of "near-sea defense,"[87] there was also increasing official emphasis on the navy's role in safeguarding the country's "maritime rights and interests" (海洋权益).[88] Meanwhile, China was once again stepping up its assertiveness regarding maritime claims. In 2005, China passed the "Anti-Secession Law," further providing legal tools to legitimize potential invasion of Taiwan by stating that China "shall adopt non-peaceful or other necessary measures to defend state sovereignty and territorial integrity" once "the possibility of peaceful reunification has been completely exhausted."[89]

Four incidents in 2008 made the year remarkable for Chinese nationalists. First, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) lost the presidential election in Taiwan, which Beijing saw as a failure of "Taiwanese separatists" and therefore a victory for Chinese who wished for "peaceful reunification."[90] The second was the successful organization of the Beijing Olympics, which received extensive global media coverage and created the image of "China's 'coming out' on the world stage."[91] The third incident was the global financial crisis, which was widely seen as "a sign of the weakening of the United States' economic might and international prestige."[92]

The fourth incident, which is also most relevant to China's naval nationalism, was the country's participation in the international campaign to counter piracy in the Gulf of Aden. It was China's first naval operation in the far seas contributing to global maritime affairs, and was promoted domestically as a huge progression in the country's naval development. As emphasized by a naval officer during an interview with PLA media, the success of the country's "first meaningful military operations in the far sea" would "accelerate the progress of the PLAN moving toward the far sea," adding that "during the operation, our officers and soldiers demonstrated the image of the Chinese navy to the world with good military qualities."[93] Propaganda efforts continued almost six years after the naval deployment. In 2014, China Central Television (CCTV) aired a TV drama series "In the Gulf of Aden" (舰在亚丁湾),[94] which Andrew Erickson and Austin Strange observed reflected the regime's effort to further promote the country as a strong and responsible global power both internationally and domestically through its navy.[95]

While all these incidents contributed to a greater sense in China that the country had "stood up" and emerged as a great power with global significance, the easing of the external threat environment also suggested the limitations of threat environment theory in explaining China's continued naval expansion. Therefore, from this point onward, it is even clear that naval nationalism began to assume a more dominant position in driving the country's naval development, signified by the rising interest in building a world-class blue-water navy with an aircraft carrier. As reported in a cover story of World Knowledge, a Chinese magazine owned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "the largest-

ever discussion of China's sea power is enthusiastically developing on the internet, in the media, research seminars, policy circles, and even in casual street conversation," followed by the observation that "building China's own aircraft carrier is a dream for countless Chinese people."[96] Amid rising demand for a carrier-based blue-water navy in China, a Major General of PLAN clearly stated during an interview in late 2008 that "the navy of any great power [...] has the dream to have one or more aircraft carriers."[97] That year also marked the first time China included far-sea operations in its national defense strategy. As stated in China's Defense in 2008, the white paper document published by the Chinese government, in addition to working "to comprehensively improve the capability of fighting in the near sea," the PLAN should also "gradually develop the capability of responding to non-traditional security threats in the far sea, and promote the overall transformation of naval construction."[98]

In the following years, China became increasingly blatant about its maritime ambitions. In 2009, China submitted its infamous nine-dash line claim to the United Nations, claiming virtually the entire South China Sea as its maritime territory.[99] During the same period, a US ocean surveillance ship was harassed by five Chinese vessels in the South China Sea, with the latter warning the US ship to leave the waters or "suffer the consequences."[100] Beyond asserting maritime claims, China unveiled its ambition to possess a carrier-based blue-water navy. In September 2012, China announced the commissioning of the country's first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, which also fueled nationalist sentiment. A report by Chinese state media claimed that the induction of an aircraft carrier held great significance not only for comprehensively enhancing Chinese naval capabilities but also for "safeguarding national sovereignty, security and development interests, and promoting world peace."[101] Less than two months after commissioning its first aircraft carrier, during his final report as CCP general secretary, Hu Jintao declared the national goal to "construct a strong sea power" (建设海洋强国).[102]

Since the 1980s, China's maritime ambitions have been largely proportionated to the country's national strength and self-perceived international status. By the time China's first aircraft carrier was commissioned and Hu Jintao declared his ambition to make China a strong sea power, China had surpassed Japan and emerged as the world's second-largest economy.[103] However, it would not be until Xi Jinping assumed power that naval nationalism would achieve an unprecedented dominant position in China's strategic thinking. Extensive studies have demonstrated how Xi's rhetorical vision of "national rejuvenation" is indeed a nationalist approach to consolidate his power and legitimacy.[104] Soon after Xi became the president of China, he not only endorsed the national goal to make China a strong sea power as declared by his predecessor but also cited it as "having huge and deep significance for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."[105]

Xi's enthusiasm for sea power proved to be serious. As discussed earlier in this paper, by the early 2010s, China's economy had become less reliant on exports, with its energy security never truly relying on SLOCs in the far seas; meanwhile, the PLAN had already established its capability to conduct "near-sea defense" to protect its flourishing coastal regions. However, driven by the desire to construct a strong sea power, in the 2013 white

paper document The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces, the navy received unprecedented focus, justified by the statement that "constructing a strong sea power is the country's vital development strategy; to firmly safeguard the country's maritime rights and interests is the vital duty of the PLA."[106] The maritime-focused position was further enhanced two years later, by which the white paper document China's Military Strategy directed that "the traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance must be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests."[107] The country's blue-water navy ambitions were further evident in 2019, when it stated that the PLAN must "accelerate the shift from near-sea defense to far-sea protection" to become a "strong and modernized navy."[108]

As Xi Jinping was determined to position China as a sea power, the maritime-oriented shift was systematized through PLA reforms in the mid-2010s. Under the reforms, the PLA ground forces were primarily targeted, with significant resources being pulled and reallocated, breaking traditional ground force dominance.[109] Meanwhile, the PLAN continued to expand its fleet. Two more aircraft carriers were successively launched in 2017 and 2022,[110] and China is reportedly building its fourth carrier.[111] There is also evidence that China is working on its first nuclear icebreaker, enabling the country to project power to the Arctic.[112] Few would now doubt China's intention to build a strong blue-water navy capable of projecting power globally.

Conclusion

As presented in this paper, while threat environment theory and economic security have made considerable contributions to China's naval development, especially in the early years of the PLAN modernization, their actual significance is overstated. Their explanatory power has also faded by the 2010s. As a complement, naval nationalism has consistently contributed to the country's maritime ambitions and naval expansion, suggesting that China's desire to possess a strong navy with global projection capability, in order to match the country's self-perception as a great global power, has been among the major factors driving China's naval development since the 1980s.

The prevalence of rhetoric in China in recent years, such as "the East is rising and the West is declining" (东升西降) and "thriving China and the chaotic West" (中治西乱),[113] suggests that China increasingly sees itself as superior to the declining Western world. This sense of superiority, along with the sense of urgency due to Xi's expressed goal to achieve the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation on all fronts" by mid-21st century,[114] may further translate into additional growth of naval nationalism, pushing the country to aim for having the world's strongest navy compatible with its superior international status. This is a dangerous geopolitical sign, as it indicates growing impatience in China toward the status quo in the Western Pacific, which still remains dominated by the US. There is currently little indication that China would stop pushing forward at sea, nor that the US would abandon its naval presence in the region. Therefore, it is sensible for the world to prepare for the time when Beijing decides to take steps to challenge US naval supremacy, "reclaiming" the waters and islands it believes to be Chinese territory, and completing the final piece to realize its maritime ambitions.

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Analysing the US-China "AI Cold War" Narrative

Yujia He & Richard Heeks

Abstract: *Discussions about artificial intelligence (AI) are gaining prominence in the recent revival of "cold war" narratives comparing US-China relations today to the historical rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union. Drawing on a review of existing academic and policy literature engaging with the "AI cold war" narrative, this paper examines how the narrative is justified, and numerous ways that it can be challenged. It finds that the framing is largely driven by the securitisation of AI, as state actors and policy pundits view AI innovations' dual-use capabilities as key to national security and ideological competition. However, critics posit that the narrative exaggerates China's AI capabilities, promotes commercial interests of tech firms and defence contractors, creates self-reinforced militarisation, and undermines the potential for international research and regulatory cooperation. Moreover, the cold war binary framing may misrepresent the global distribution of AI capabilities. To extend beyond the AI cold war narrative, future research may recognise the limitations of the binary framing and expand analysis on the AI development strategies of third-party players (including those from the Global South) drawing upon local and regional political economic dynamics and development contexts. This paper concludes by inviting scholars to rethink the affective power of narratives and contribute research and narrative analysis that allow for the articulation of perspectives from third countries.*

The contentious relationship between the US and China in the past decade has prompted debates about whether the world has entered a "new cold war". Since the Obama Administration's 2011 "Pivot to Asia", Washington's China policy has shifted from economic engagement alongside maintaining security interests (e.g. Taiwan and the South China Sea), towards balancing against a rising China and strengthening American hegemonic power.[1] US-China relations rapidly worsened under the first Trump Administration (2017-2021) which characterised China as a fully-fledged security threat.[2] Following the 2017 publication of the US National Security Strategy naming China as a "strategic competitor", "strategic competition" has become the ubiquitous bipartisan framing in Washington's China policy.[3] The Biden Administration (2021-2025), though differing in many ways from Trump's American First foreign policy, viewed China as a prevailing threat to American leadership and "the most serious long-term challenge to the international order".[4] The new Trump Administration, by reigniting a trade war, seems to continue the strategy of decoupling from China.

Among international relations observers, neorealist scholars tend to view this shift towards great power competition as the inevitable result of change in the balance of power in the international system. A prevailing view, based on the power transition theory, is Graham Allison's "Thucydides trap". Drawing from historical case studies, Allison argued that a war is likely to occur between a rising power and the hegemon, due to the severe structural stress caused when the former threatens to displace the latter. Therefore, "war between the United States and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than recognized at the moment."[5] Meanwhile, other scholars have challenged this view. For example, Chan (2020)[6] and Hanania (2023)[7] identified flaws in Allison's case selection and research strategy. He (2022)[8] and He & Feng (2025)[9] pointed to other variables like international institutions and institutional competition in possibly supporting a peaceful order transition. Chan (2020, 2021)[10] further pointed to the role of third countries in influencing conflicts occurrence and outcomes, and critiqued the ethnocentrism embedded in the "Thucydides trap" assumption of the rising power as a revisionist state.

Nonetheless, the "Thucydides trap" and broadly the power transition theory has garnered significant popularity in the policy community, evidenced by the endorsement of prominent politicians in Washington.[11] Coupled with the worsening bilateral relations, it has generated a revival in "cold war" narratives, including "new cold war"[12] and "Second Cold War."[13] At a general level, many see the resonant patterns of today's US-China tensions from the First Cold War between US and USSR, including "an ideological divide … emerging coalitions … growing competition for influence in the Global South."[14]

Notably, the centrality of competition in the technological sphere, especially in digital technology, has led to references to a "tech Cold War"[15] and "digital Cold War."[16] The concept has emerged as a buzzword invoked in discussions of policies and countermeasures across different issue areas, including cyber warfare and cyber attacks, export controls, sanctions, investment restrictions, and supply chain diversification.[17] Among the range of digital technologies, artificial intelligence (AI) is sometimes picked out as the chief "battleground" between the two superpowers,[18] leading to discussions surrounding an "AI cold war."[19]

In this paper, we wish to examine particularly the narrative around an "AI cold war", based on a review of key academic and policy literature. While not seeking to minimise the structural factors and the power-based view of interstate competition, this study adds to the literature by employing a narrative review approach, critically exploring and reflecting on the development and the implications of this narrative that often underpins discussions surrounding AI in international relations. What evidence is provided for the existence of an AI cold war? What critiques are offered? What are the implications of use of the term?

This study finds that the "AI cold war" narrative is largely shaped by the securitisation of AI, as state actors and policy pundits view AI innovations' dual-use capabilities as key to national security and ideological competition. However, the narrative overshadows other important perspectives concerning AI development. Critiques include that it

exaggerates threats from China's AI capabilities, serves the commercial interests of tech firms and defence contractors, reinforces militarisation and racialised sentiment, and undermines the potential for international research and regulatory cooperation. The binary framing also misrepresents the global distribution of AI capabilities. Recognising the limitations of the framing, future research may expand on the roles and the strategies of third-party players (including Global South players), drawing upon local and regional political economic dynamics and development contexts, and diversifying narratives beyond the "AI cold war".

This paper proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the narrative review methodology. The third section identifies the affirmatory views in the literature, which in some way accept the idea of an "AI cold war". The fourth section identifies the critique which questions the use of the term and its implications. The fifth section reflects on the narrative's analytical limitations and discusses possible areas of research inquiry. The concluding section summarises the findings and the implications for broader IR scholarship and for policymaking.

The narrative review approach to interrogate a dominant analytical framing

The expansive international relations scholarship on AI has mainly covered four themes: the balance of power, disinformation, governance, and ethics.[20] According to Bode (2024), while most existing scholarship on these established themes "works with well-established IR conceptualisations", several possible research avenues may expand beyond established frameworks. Among them is "beyond the AI arms race", critically reflecting on the arms race as the dominant analytical framing about AI and IR.[21]

This paper therefore aims to contribute to the literature through a comprehensive narrative review of how academic and policy analysis engages with the term "AI cold war". The narrative literature review method allows researchers to "describe what is known on a topic while conducting a subjective examination and critique of an entire body of literature".[22] It is particularly useful for offering "an interpretation of the literature, note gaps, and critique research to date", thereby setting the stage for future research.[23] By focusing on narratives, this paper also follows the "narrative turn" in IR scholarship[24] that employs a critical and reflective approach to "explore how narratives are shaped, how they appeal to specific political audiences, and whose interests are served by dominant political narratives."[25]

The data source for this narrative review included two components. 1) Articles, books and reports from relevant databases of Google Scholar and Web of Science. The search strategy involved first using specific keywords of "AI cold war", then reviewing each article's headlines for its relevance to the research questions and reviewing the relevant article's content to confirm the inclusion in this review. The selection excluded literature that primarily used the term to describe AI with no reference to international relations (e.g. business management), or in the context of other power relations such as between Russia and the US or other western powers. This yielded a total of 62 publications published by 2024 that formed the basis of the review of the academic literature. 2)

Major policy publications that referenced the term "AI cold war". The quantity of documents from non-scholarly sources that referenced the term is massive, therefore a systematic query would be beyond the scope of the study. The authors therefore prioritised documents from key government agencies, congressional commissions, and think tanks as a proxy to understand the use of the term in the political discourse. They complement the review of the academic literature in making sense of how the narrative is substantiated, understood and interpreted. The references of the selected scholarly articles were reviewed to find relevant policy publications.

The authors then conducted the data extraction process of identifying and summarising key information from the selected publications. The synthesis of the extracted data followed these steps to embrace a holistic perspective in writing narrative reviews[26]: identifying common themes and patterns across the literature; assessing the strengths and the weaknesses of the different arguments for each theme; comparing findings across studies to highlight consistencies and discrepancies; integrating the findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state of work.

Affirmation of an "AI Cold War"

The AI cold war narrative appears to have emerged in tandem with broader security interests about AI in the political discourse. The term "AI cold war" can be originated to a Wired article in October 2018 entitled, "The AI Cold War That Threatens Us All"[27], with a growth in occurrences since then[28]. This source in turn traces use of the term back to a Henry Kissinger piece on the dangers of AI in The Atlantic[29] that led to a White House-organised AI Summit. According to Thompson & Bremmer (2018), "By midsummer (of 2018), talk of a "new cold war arms race" over artificial intelligence was pervasive in the US media."[30]

As the quote suggests, there is significant overlap in use of the term "AI cold war" with the term "AI arms race". While terms such as "AI race" or "AI competition" are also widely used in the political discourses, there are some crucial differences. The primary distinction is that the former terms introduce a securitisation of narrative[31]: framing relations as an issue of national security, and seeing the other state as an external threat of sufficient magnitude to require adoption of exceptional measures.[32] The "cold war" framing introduces a militarisation of narrative, which frames relations in terms of "military ideas, values and imagery."[33] Moreover, it introduces a resonance with, and invites parallels with the First Cold War.[34]

There is an argument that securitisation, even militarisation, of the AI debate could be justified. Some literature[35] has outlined several main rationales for the securitisation of AI. Firstly, most AI innovations are inherently dual-use, possessing both civilian and military use capabilities, and they can be used for both positive and harmful purposes. Therefore, AI poses national security risks that warrant mitigation. Secondly, unlike other dual-use technologies such as nuclear power, AI-powered digital applications are varied, and increasingly ubiquitous across industrial sectors and in people's daily lives, and AI's future uses are still unclear. Digital technologies are also more difficult to be "geographically contained" than material technologies like missile weapons systems.[36] So, AI poses unique and substantial security vulnerabilities. Thirdly, nation states and

defence contractors have invested significantly in AI, and "a race to militarize artificial intelligence is gearing up".[37] For example, Horowitz (2018) viewed China's and Russia's investment in AI as to "increase their relative military capabilities with an eye toward reshaping the balance of power."[38] Horowitz (2018) further argued that the risk for the US is "taking its military superiority for granted and ending up like Great Britain's Royal Navy with the aircraft carrier in the mid-20th century."[39]

Thus, a number of literature sources largely affirm the notion of an AI cold war, referencing growing investments by major countries in military applications of AI[40], and the emergence of adversarial elements in US-China relations.[41] Further analysis of the evidence presented for the affirmative use of the term shows that state actors and policy pundits view AI innovations as key to national security, which largely echoes the broader competitive balance-of-power framing.

On the US side, as noted earlier, the successive National Security Strategies of the Trump and Biden Administrations demonstrated a bipartisan consensus viewing China as the greatest challenge to US national security.[42] Concerning AI, the official policy discourse has called for maintaining US technology leadership and harnessing AI to fulfil national security objectives.[43] The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has warned that the biggest security threat in the "new cold war" of AI usage comes from China and its AI-enabled capabilities in cyber-attacks and spying .[44] The US Department of Defense AI Adoption Strategy, published in 2023, seeks to accelerate advanced AI capabilities adoption to ensure "decisive superiority on the battlefield for years to come".[45] The "shift towards AI and 'data driven' warfare" has led the Pentagon to award "large multi-billion dollar contracts to Microsoft, Amazon, Google, and Oracle."[46]

In addition, the understanding that tech innovations are crucial to political influence and ideological prestige has led to AI being seen to have paramount influence in Washington's policy centred on great power competition. This is not new: US federal innovation policy during the First Cold War followed a mission-oriented approach, partly motivated by "national prestige and ideological competition" with the Soviet bloc.[47] Because of AI's perceived significant role in surveillance and domestic governance, views that AI capabilities may shape the competition between democracies and authoritarian regimes and the future of the world order have also sprung up, drawing comparisons to the historical Cold War.[48] Some pundits argue that the US likewise needs to maintain technological leadership in AI for ideological supremacy, in the coming "Cold War 2.0 against autocracies."[49]

On the Chinese side, some literature sources note that "China under Xi seeks to use AI for more military purposes,"[50] and so, "China's race to exploit and integrate Artificial Intelligence (AI) into their military is rising exponentially."[51] Under President Xi's call to enhance strategic capabilities in emerging areas, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been shifting toward "intelligentized warfare."[52] Chinese military lawmakers and experts recognise such capabilities as "a focal point in major power competition, a vantage point in high-end warfare", stressing the importance of enhancing AI-enabled combat capabilities.[53] Nonetheless, Beijing's official discourse has opposed the broader "new cold war" rhetoric as an "attack and smear" campaign pushed by "some political forces in the US...taking China-US relations hostage and pushing our two countries to the brink of a new Cold War."[54]

The securitisation of AI in narratives affirming the "cold war" has also risen in the economic realm. A number of literature sources note the increasing use of economic policies, such as export controls, investment screening, and industrial policies concerning AI development to serve the state's geostrategic interests. Besides major investments in domestic AI capabilities, Washington has deployed coercive policy instruments, such as export controls on advanced AI chips and manufacturing equipment to China, to counter the perceived threats from Chinese offensive cyber operations and military capabilities.[55] This has generated rising interest in how to navigate the "tech cold war" among the business community and among international business scholarship.[56] Meanwhile, Beijing has used the term "cold war mentality" to criticise US policies aiming to curb Chinese firms' access to technology, supply chains and investments, and vowed to retaliate and counter US "containment" efforts[57], which likely contributes to the narrative's popularity.

A smaller fraction of literature – what might be called critical-affirmatory – accepts not just the existence of an "AI cold war" as rhetoric but also, mostly from a US perspective, some legitimacy in the securitisation of narrative: "some of the claims of this narrative are based at least in part on genuine security concerns and important unknowns."[58] However, the conclusions drawn are critical of the narrative in some way, as discussed in the next section.

Critique of an "AI Cold War"

Among those critical of the "AI cold war" narrative, three main threads of critique can be identified from the literature: exaggeration of threats; promotion of Big Tech interests; and various negative consequences from the narrative's mainstreaming.

Exaggeration of threats from Chinese capabilities

The first thread of critique argues that the inequality in AI power between the US and China means that the threat from China has been exaggerated[59,60]. In making this argument, Zeng (2022) is specific about security: "existing analyses vastly exaggerate ... the extent of China's AI advancement and its geopolitical threat."[61]

Other papers step outside the security arena and look generally at AI capabilities. Their critique is perhaps fitting to the notion of the AI arms race rather more than the AI cold war. Some talk about this in general terms, for example about the "large education and innovation gaps" that exist in AI between the US and China, but others bring concrete data[62]. Bryson & Malikova (2021) use data on market capitalisation (MC) of firms and intellectual property (IP) patents that encompass AI to demonstrate that China is "still dwarfed again by the United States, in terms of both MC and IP"[63]: for example, capitalisation of US\$1.5bn in China vs. US\$9.8bn in the US in 2020. Olson (2024) focuses on more specific outputs: "When it comes to producing machine learning models of note, the US is still far ahead with 61 ... while China ranks second with just 15."[64] Such claims are supported by the latest 2024 Government AI Readiness Index which ranked the US first and China 23rd. China scored lower than the US on all three foundations for AI: government, technology sector, and data and infrastructure.[65]

Exaggeration of the capabilities of one's adversary (or conversely of one's own country's vulnerabilities) of course brings echoes from the past:

> *"Americans, however, have a history of overestimating the technological prowess of their competitors. During the Cold War, bloated estimates of Soviet capabilities led U.S. officials to make policy on the basis of a hypothesized "bomber gap" and then "missile gap," both of which were later proved to be fictional."*[66]

And this goes even further back: "The exaggeration of American vulnerability … has been a recurring feature of debates over American foreign and defence policy for at least a hundred years."[67]

The Militarising Big Tech's Interests behind the Push for "AI Cold War"

The second thread of critique picks up this issue of exaggeration of security threats and seeks to explain why actors adopt the AI cold war rhetoric. Some authors in this thread of critique see that rhetoric as based in part on a genuine belief rather than being a deliberate exaggeration.[68] This critique overall centres on the actors pushing for the narrative and how it serves their interests.

On the US side, according to AI Now Institute, the notion of an "AI arms race", a close equivalent of AI cold war, "has evolved from a sporadic talking point to an increasingly institutionalised position, represented by collaborative initiatives between government, military, and tech-industry actors and reinforced by legislation and regulatory debates."[69] The main benefit said to be sought by those promoting the notion of an AI cold war is a minimisation of regulatory constraints or ethical concerns on AI innovation. As Bryson & Malikova (2021) wondered, "could at least some of the proposing or amplifying of claims postulating an AI cold war be intended to disrupt new regulation?"[70] Xue & Guo (2024) also posit that "They (the proponents of the narrative) argue … that ethical inquiry is a distraction from this political reality (AI cold war)."[71]

The "they" in question is seen to be US Big Tech firms: "when US tech companies argue for more lax regulation lest China race ahead, they are likely exaggerating the threat for their own purposes."[72] For example, AI Now Institute's 2023 report presented a detailed timeline of how the AI arms race rhetoric has been institutionalised in US policy discourse and "leveraged by stakeholders to push back against regulatory intervention targeting Big Tech companies, such as on antitrust, data privacy, and algorithmic accountability."[73] The position of US Big Tech is often instantiated in the 2021 National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence report[74] authored by a commission chaired by Eric Schmidt, the former CEO of Google[75].

Alongside constraints on AI regulation, Big Tech firms, in tandem with stakeholders within the defence and security arms of the US government, are also said to be using securitised, militarised rhetoric around AI to obtain greater state investment. Such rhetoric appeals to political audiences and justifies the deployment of "more resources and support to not only the American AI-enabled military sector but also the AI commercial industry."[76] The irony, according to some observers, is that some players like Mr. Schmidt pursue a two-track approach: employing the cold war narrative to warn

US policymakers about the threat from China and obtain US government funding, while using government resources to pursue personal connections and investment opportunities with the Chinese AI industry.[77]

Dangers of the framing

<u>Mutually reinforcing securitisation and militarisation</u>

Whereas it is largely seen as commercial actors in the US who contribute to securitising AI discourse for commercial benefits, along with a constellation of national security and intelligence actors, in China it is said to be the Chinese state that does this for the purposes of stimulating other actors to focus on AI. For example, Zeng (2022) argues that: "AI is being securitized by the Chinese central government to mobilize local states, market actors, intellectuals and the general public"[78]. The derivation of the Chinese state's securitisation of AI and AI discourse is seen in part to derive from and be fed by AI securitisation and militarisation in the US: a mutual reinforcement that is potentially "setting both countries on a dangerous path."[79]

This, then, represents the third thread of critique: the dangers of AI cold war rhetoric. That the militarised element becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading ultimately to a hot war is obviously the greatest danger.[80] Beyond this is the concern that a focus on militarisation of AI "diverts resources and attention from nearer existential threats, such as extreme weather events."[81] Observers also note that the "arms race" rhetoric has led to relatively less policy support for non-military applications of AI in US federal policy.[82]

<u>Negative consequences for international research collaboration, Asian community, and AI governance</u>

Some literature points to the danger of the "cold war" or "arms race" rhetoric in contributing to a difficult environment for international collaboration in AI research and development (R&D) and AI governance. On the one hand, China's Civil-Military Fusion strategy for developing military-technological innovation, including AI innovations, has intensified US concerns of security threats from international R&D collaboration with Chinese players, on top of concerns about industrial espionage. A 2019 Congressional hearing led by the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission concluded that "civilian academic collaboration and business partnerships between the United States and China could aid China's military development."[83]

Yet on the other hand, the cold war rhetoric is seen to create an increasingly hostile environment for researchers, who face already stringent regulations on research security in both the US and China.[84] The fracturing of cross-border R&D collaboration between the US and China is seen to slow the international flow of knowledge and talent, and thus decrease the research output for both countries and slow the pace of innovation on a global scale.[85] The controversial "China Initiative" led by the US FBI was accused of racial profiling and surveillance in its investigations targeting Chinese-American scientists, including AI researchers, creating "general feelings of fear and anxiety that lead them to consider leaving the United States and/or stop applying for federal grants."[86]

This leads to another critique of the AI arms race narrative (which often overlaps with the cold war narrative): it is built upon "racial structures of power" and "previous racialised configurations of anti-Asian sentiment."[87] The rhetoric "draws on older forms of techno-Orientalism and anti-Asian racism to portray China as a distinctly racialised and Othered civilizational threat to the US."[88] McInerney noted some parallels with the US characterization of threats from Japan's economic and technological power, and the rise of anti-Asian racial violence in the US in the 1980s.

The rhetoric is also seen to risk undermining safety and ethics in AI development and deployment, and the potential for much-needed international cooperation on AI governance.[89] This includes regulation of military applications with risk, from a US perspective, of "a permanent cleavage [that] … will only give techno-authoritarianism more room to grow."[90]

Implications for third countries

The final danger is seen to be for third countries which "will be forced to "choose sides"[91], with the potential that aligning with one will harm relations with the other power. Thompson & Bremmer (2018) note that "it will all seem uncomfortably close to the arms and security pacts that defined the Cold War."[92] Relatedly, a critique of the AI cold war narrative is that it mischaracterises "an increasingly complex and multipolar world into a binary one". The rhetoric ignores the influence of other important players such as the EU[93] and their policy choices which do not neatly follow the logic of alignment. As will be discussed in the next section, this is a knowledge gap to which future research may contribute.

Discussion: what to make of the narrative and the contestations for future research

As the AI cold war rhetoric becomes more popular (and also contested), it has prompted rising scholarly interest about the implications of the framing for research and possibilities of a future research agenda. Some literature the authors reviewed identified a broad compass for more research on national or global governance of AI, the domestic and global politics that shapes that governance,[94] and on business strategies of innovation for multinational enterprises and high-tech startups amidst rising "techno-nationalism."[95] Some pointed specifically to tracking and analysing the terminology and imagery within the narratives around Sino-US AI relations, including their sources and their implications. Those implications include not just relations between the two powers but also the strategies of third countries.[96] This section draws on the review's findings and broader scholarly analysis to discuss areas where scholars can contribute evidence-based insights towards a more inclusive research agenda.

Limitation of the AI cold war binary framing

In looking to the future, one main point of discussion in the current AI literature (with more link to the notion of an AI arms race) is whether China will catch up with the US in terms of AI. Some see China having a set of advantages over the US which are likely to propel its catch-up and possibly even global leadership in AI. For example, a report co-authored by Graham Allison and Eric Schmidt viewed China having

advantages derived from its larger population that could benefit AI implementation, such as the greater scale and scope of data that can be made available for AI model training, the larger Chinese domestic market, and a large domestic talent pool offering less expensive labour.[97] They also include characteristics related to China's innovation system: for example, the relatively more centralised decision making of the Chinese state, and its willingness to employ industrial policy and government support such as public procurement for indigenous technology is seen as an advantage. Some argue that China's AI development may benefit from closer relations between the state and Chinese Big Tech than is the case in the US, and cite the greater level of Chinese investment being made in AI.[98] This advantage may however be debatable, as US Big Tech have become key players in defence contracts and sought closer alliances with the so-called "National Security State."[99]

Others are more circumspect in their analysis, expressing disagreement or scepticism about the possibility of China overtaking the US in both military AI or general AI capabilities. A review of Chinese-language articles written by military experts shows that most Chinese defence experts perceive various significant barriers to the development and deployment of AI in the PLA, and see the US maintaining leadership in military AI.[100] Some analysis cites a whole slew of constraints facing AI innovation in China: US AI-related export restrictions and China's relative lack of compute power, a deficit in top AI talent, inefficiencies in state funding, a relatively closed innovation system characterised by strong government control including censorship and by lack of inward flow of talent, and global domination of the English language in the text sources that are used for model training.[101] A central bone of contention in this literature is whether China's authoritarian state, with its absence of pluralism and weak civil society and lack of rights-based guarantees, represents a strength for future US AI innovation[102] or a strength for China's future AI innovation.[103] One may relate this to broader scholarly discussions about the link between democracy and science, and the role of state policy actions in science and technological advancement.[104]

The release of DeepSeek-R1, an open-source large language model (LLM) that performed on par with some leading LLMs by US AI companies in early 2025 has renewed discussions of US-China AI competition. DeepSeek was lauded by Beijing as an example of Chinese "innovative, open, sharing approach" to AI development,[105] and to many commentators it demonstrated the possibility of Chinese AI advancement potentially catching up with the US despite US export restrictions on high-end semiconductors.[106] Some viewed the fact that the team consisted mostly of Chinese-university-educated researchers as a testimony to successful domestic talent development.[107] While DeepSeek's purported cost reduction for model development has been debated, some saw it potentially changing AI business models that could benefit companies globally to catch up with US firms in building smaller models and AI applications.[108] Meanwhile, Washington sounded the alarm over DeepSeek as "a wake-up call" for America.[109] Policy analysts and tech CEOs vowed that America must win "the AI race/war" in media and congressional hearings.[110] Export control is still a hotspot for US policy, as Washington believes that DeepSeek's capabilities relied on work-around access to US high-end chips, including prior purchases, access through shell companies or remotely through data centres in non-restricted countries.[111]

Yet as the critical viewpoints presented above suggest, the binary framing focusing on the US and China as two AI superpowers and their relative strengths or vulnerabilities is analytically narrow, overlooking other important aspects of AI development. It also misrepresents the global distribution of AI capabilities.[112] Data from Bryson & Malikova (2021) shows that in terms of both firm patents and market capitalisation, the US exceeds China, the EU and the rest of the world combined.[113] Meanwhile, by the measure of firm patents, the EU is on par with China, so the EU is hardly an inconsequential player as the cold war framing might suggest. In terms of both patents and market capitalisation, the rest of the world (excluding US, China, EU) combined exceeds both the EU and China, again calling the binary framing into question.

AI development strategies of third-party economies

The weakness of the binary framing embedded in the AI cold war narrative naturally leads to a new research area: the third-party countries' AI development strategies. Emergent analysis of third-party states' current strategies nonetheless often takes the binary US-China power competition framing as the pretext. Some analysis accepts the view of the "AI cold war", noting in general the difficulty of a "mix-and-match" alignment strategy that hedges between the two powers.[114] Some analysis specifically advises the alignment with one power against another: for example, Pathak & Jindal (2023)[115] and Mohanty & Singh (2024)[116] advise India to more closely collaborate with the US in AI, while also acknowledging divergences in India's and the US regulatory approaches.

In practice, security alliances, or overlapping interests in national security concerns, may not be the only factor influencing third country's strategies. For example, even for traditional security allies of the US such as Japan and South Korea, there seems to be reluctance in fully supporting Washington's call for coercive sanctions such as export control against Chinese players.[117] Notably, South Korea's newly appointed presidential chief AI advisor advocates for a "sovereign AI" strategy: securing capabilities across the entire AI industry value chain, and building AI systems that "deeply understand and align with the nation's own language, culture, laws, and social values."[118] He argues that South Korea possesses nearly all the components of the AI "full-stack", from semiconductors to cloud infrastructure, data and AI talents. The strategy is promoted as a unique proposal to "nations in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and beyond that are wary of the technological hegemony of both superpowers, the U.S. and China."[119] Meanwhile, some industry players countered that the state-led push for a national large-language model may divert resources away from AI applications development and favour domestic tech giants, one of which the advisor hails from.[120] This suggests that for technologically advanced middle powers like South Korea, besides external security alliances often favoured by proponents of the "cold war" narrative, complex domestic political economic considerations may shape the national AI strategy and its implementation, necessitating further research and analysis.

In this vein, while not a single state but a supranational union, the European Union is seen by some as the third major player (alongside the US and China), with a quest for both strategic autonomy and global technological leadership.[121] This view echoes the data evidence from Bryson & Malikova (2021) noted earlier. Broadly speaking, as Danzman & Meunier (2024) argued, a confluence of factors (heightened geopolitical

tensions from US-China competition, the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the unilateral protectionist turn in US policy) has led to the EU pivoting towards the securitisation of its economic policy.[122] The EU's various new trade, investment and innovation policy tools aim to advance its own security interests under the new doctrine of "open strategic autonomy". EU policy embraces "a global AI race logic" and emphasises the need for digital sovereignty and jurisdictional independence in AI.[123] The Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence adopted in 2024 is the first-ever international legally binding treaty concerning AI, upholding human rights, democracy and the rule of law in AI development.[124]

Research on the EU often highlights the so-called "Brussels Effect", through which the EU leverages firms' desire to access its internal market to exert regulatory influence, resulting in the potential de jure or de facto harmonisation of regulatory standards globally.[125] Meanwhile, some argue that EU AI sovereignty is a myth: "given the absence of a leading AI industry and a coherent defence strategy, the EU has few tools to become a global leader in advancing standards of AI beyond its regulatory capacity."[126] In practice, the EU's regulatory power in AI governance appears to encounter some rising challenges. The EU AI Act, lauded as the world's first binding comprehensive regulation on AI,[127] currently faces uncertainty in the implementation of some key provisions.[128] Observers attribute it to a change in Brussels' focus from safety towards promoting innovation and simplifying laws, European firms' call for more regulatory clarity and less compliance burdens, and US Big Tech and Washington's push to pause the legislation.[129] Hence, while the EU's role may in effect counter the binary AI cold war logic, further research is needed to understand various internal and external factors that may influence the EU's evolving AI strategy, and how and to what extent the EU may assert its influence globally in AI development and regulations.

AI development strategies of the Global South amidst geopolitical tensions

A notable gap that emerged from this narrative review is the limited analysis about how the AI cold war narrative is perceived by Global South[130] players, and more broadly, how and to what extent global geopolitics may influence their AI development strategies. Historians of cold war studies have noted the importance of adding "the North-South dimension to the analysis of the Cold War by focusing on the agency of Third World actors."[131] Historically, Global South countries employed "a myriad of different diplomatic strategies, international networks, and political actions" with "overlapping identities" under the proclaimed neutrality, to "escape the binary logic" of cold war rivalry.[132] Some observers of the current geopolitical tensions similarly argued that "Cold War 2.0 is ushering in Non Alignment 2.0."[133] International relations scholars studying developing regions have long argued for mitigating the American bias in scholarship, and in the context of present-day geopolitical tensions, "trying explicitly to move beyond U.S.- or PRC-centric assessment."[134] To avoid binary thinking, scholars call for highlighting "local narratives and regional perspectives about the opportunities and challenges posed by shifting power distributions and security dynamics."[135] This represents a new area where scholars may contribute evidence-based research.

While not focusing on AI, some current research from the Global South on the implications of geopolitical tensions for technology policy highlights local elites' perceptions of risks and benefits of international technology partnerships, and various possible political strategies to achieve their development goals. For example, Kuik (2024) found that Southeast Asian states' decisions concerning Chinese vendor Huawei in national 5G networks can be viewed as varied degrees of light or hard "hedging" (yet still not taking sides).[136] The variation can be attributed to local elites' perception and legitimisation of economy-security trade-offs concerning partnerships with Huawei and other domestic attributes. Qobo and Mzyece (2023) argued that African actors should diversify their critical technology infrastructure sources and "insist on acquiring and developing new technologies like 5G based on objective criteria that serve their development needs rather than those of the foreigners."[137] They also argued for retaining and exercising African "agency", including increasing African integration and enhancing resilience against external pressures through regionalisation efforts, negotiating with diversified international partners and via international forums,[138] and participating in international technology standard-setting processes.

An increasing number of middle- and low-income countries published their national AI development strategies in 2023 and 2024, with geographic diversity across Africa, Latin America, and Asia.[139] This is a dimension that the "AI cold war" narrative with its focus on the major powers may overlook. As the studies above suggest, researchers need to understand unique local and regional perspectives that may shape developing states' technology development strategies amidst global geopolitical tensions. This likely means a mixture of context-specific factors are at play, such as domestic politics, socioeconomic concerns, and technology development needs, which may interact with external security dynamics to influence a government's AI strategy.

In addition, regional AI-related initiatives are gaining momentum across the Global South, with examples such as:

1. The African Union Continental AI Strategy released in 2024 highlights "an Africa-centric, development-oriented and inclusive approach". The Strategy called for maximising AI benefits, building capabilities for AI (e.g. data, platforms, talent, digital literacy, research and innovation), minimising risks (in ethics, safety, and security), promoting public and private investment, and intra-African cooperation, cooperation with external partners and participation in global AI governance.[140]

2. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) released its Responsible AI Roadmap (2025-2030), and a non-binding guide on AI Governance and Ethics for organisations in Southeast Asia.[141] The ASEAN AI Safety Network, announced in 2025, is seen to enable ASEAN states to "have a unified voice and participate in global AI safety and governance discourses which are more often than not the domain of Global North countries."[142] Notably, ASEAN seeks to advance AI governance and development cooperation with both China and the US, as shown in the leadership statements for Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships with both countries in 2024.[143]

3. Latin American states adopted the Montevideo Declaration building on cooperation

with UNESCO and CAF, and a roadmap to strengthen regional technical and political dialogues on AI governance and development in 2024. Five priority areas were identified: governance and regulation, talent and future of work, protection of vulnerable groups, environment, sustainability and climate change, and infrastructure.[144]

Future research may therefore also explore the possibilities for Global South actors to advance their interests and agenda-setting in AI development through regionalisation efforts. They may include regional market integration, technology infrastructure coordination, negotiation as a bloc vis-à-vis foreign powers and possibly Big Tech firms, and participation in international institutions and multistakeholder AI governance dialogues. Of course, the scope of regional strategies and their effectiveness in implementation may vary from context to context. For example, as Gagliardone (2024) pointed out, the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection adopted in 2014 still lacks enough ratification from individual states to become active.[145] Developing states also face various barriers to meaningful participation in global AI governance initiatives.[146] Still, to decentre the focus from US-China binary cold war framing, future research may examine Global South actors' regional perspectives and strategies in AI development and governance.

Diversifying narratives beyond the "AI Cold War"

Given the discussions concerning the "AI cold war" narrative outlined in this paper so far, scholars may also critically reflect on the affective power of the "cold war" framing itself and the possibilities of diversifying narratives. On the historic Cold War and the current New Cold War narratives, Tan (2023) cautions that "the start of a New Cold War" is "likely to continue spawning Cold War-style narratives that will repolarize the world, with either/or ways of thinking to mobilize for "us" and against "them", often through the demonization of "them" into an "enemy-other.""[147] Bode et al. (2025) argue that the US side of the "tech war" should be understood as narrative practices by policymakers, analysts and academics entrenched in and supporting "the realist master narrative centred on great-power competition."[148] Chen et al. (2024) urge scholars to work "against the paranoid discursive climate that both US and Chinese governments impose" under the pervading "new cold war" framing, and recognise the power relations, positionality and materiality in academic knowledge production.[149] Specifically, they urge scholars to deliver methodological and theoretical insights involving "dynamic sociotechnical entwinements, across multiple scales, and via different positionalities" that challenge simplified understandings about China.[150] This subsection draws upon such discussions and offers some suggestions for diversifying narratives surrounding AI beyond the "cold war" framing.

Concerning AI, some observers see the future and its narrative as something to be shaped. Thompson & Bremmer (2018) argue for dropping the cold war rhetoric and replacing it with concrete Sino-US cooperation on AI rules and standards.[151] Bryson & Malikova (2021) look more at the AI policy-making process than its content, and advocate shifting from a rhetoric- and interests-led approach to an evidence-based approach:

> "Given the urgent problems facing our planet as a whole, we invite all parties to reconsider the AI cold war rhetoric and to take a data-led approach to honing regulation to benefit resilient, diverse markets and societies globally"[152]

Similarly, Su (2024) argues that the cold war rhetoric will lead to a future "further away from the globalised internet as it should be."[153] She proposes replacing it with a focus on "real solutions to underlying concerns" such as "a framework and global policy that oversees data transparency protecting it for all users regardless of what side of any potential digital cold war they come from."[154]

Marichal (2024) argues differently – that, rather than trying to move away from rhetoric and narratives, one should understand their power in politics and embrace them but ask "what other metaphors could we use?"[155] Drawing from Verity Harding's book, AI Needs You, he suggests using the metaphor of "the space race rather than the nuclear arms race", a domain in which "even if there was a competition over scientific advancement, there was also a great deal of collaboration" such as with the International Space Station.[156]

Recent moves by Beijing and Washington suggest some possibility of moving in this direction, even if only in a small, low-hanging fruit way. Two UN non-binding resolutions were adopted in 2024: one sponsored by the US with support of China on the need for global collaboration to ensure that AI is "safe, secure and trustworthy"; the other sponsored by China with the support of the US urging richer nations to close the widening gap with lower-income countries to ensure they benefit from AI.[157] The adoption of the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence in 2021 by 193 states, the first global normative framework for AI development and deployment, showed that multilateral negotiations accommodating different preferences to reach global agreements is possible.[158] Therefore, diversifying narratives beyond the "cold war" framing focus on great power competition may recognise some possible convergence of interests that could form the basis of US-China bilateral cooperation, and multilateral cooperation in AI governance.

As discussed earlier, since the cold war binary framing misrepresents the global distribution of AI capabilities, future research on third party players' AI development strategies drawing on local and regional perspectives is needed. In practice, this also means amplifying calls for the development of AI models and applications that suit diverse sociocultural contexts and development needs of the non-western world. While Big Tech firms have sought to improve their models by incorporating more languages in their training datasets, most major LLMs still underperform for non-English languages and cultural contexts, especially for low-resource languages, leading to the "LLM digital divide."[159] The crucial limitations include "a scarcity of labeled and unlabeled language data" and "poor quality data that is not sufficiently representative of the languages and their sociocultural contexts."[160] The data limitations are compounded by resource gaps such as limited Internet penetration, low digital literacy, lack of talent and computing resources in the Global South.[161]

While the hurdles are high, efforts by public and private sector players in Global South countries to develop local monolingual models and regional multilingual models are underway.[162] These models are often built upon various existing open-source models developed by US, Chinese or European companies like Meta, Google, Alibaba, and Mistral, and fine-tuned using data from local and regional languages. To overcome the data limitations, some teams have developed protocols to ethically collect data from native

speakers and redistribute revenue back for further development.[163] Some regional multilingual models, such as SEA-LION (Southeast Asian Languages In One Network) and AfriBERTa, benefit from technical collaboration with Global North firms and universities.[164] Diversifying narratives beyond the "cold war" framing may therefore recognise and promote the efforts of various Global South players to localise AI for their own linguistic and cultural nuances and development contexts.[165] In contrast to the prevailing cold war framing's singular focus on competition for technology leadership, diversified narratives may shift the focus from "scaling up" to "scaling right,"[166] emphasise the practical relevance and impact of AI for local communities, and promote South-South and North-South collaborations in co-developing AI solutions.[167]

Lastly, diversifying narratives beyond the "AI cold war" framing of great power competition may recognise the shared challenges and inequality associated with the global value chain of AI. For example, various forms of contestations surrounding labour in AI development have emerged across the US, China, and other Global South countries. Tech workers in both the US and Chinese AI industry have faced similar issues such as the precarious working conditions of those who perform "invisible labour" (e.g. data labelling, flagging content), omnipresent workplace surveillance enabled by AI, intense working culture with long hours requirements, and gender discrimination and sexual harassment.[168] New forms of grassroots resistance have also emerged. For example, in 2019 Chinese developers started a GitHub project named 996.ICU (meaning working long hours from 9AM to 9PM leads to ICU visits), to crowdsource and publicise information about companies' working conditions.[169] The project received support from developers outside of China. A group of US tech employees published an open letter urging GitHub and Microsoft (which owns GitHub) to make the project uncensored, arguing that "we have to come together across national boundaries to ensure just working conditions for everyone around the globe."[170] In Africa, AI annotators and content moderators have mobilised against US Big Tech contractors' exploitative labour practices, with support from local court ruling (in the case of Kenya) and international activist networks.[171] Diversifying narratives beyond the AI cold war can help draw our attention towards these forms of precarity and contestations in AI development that do not conform to the state-centric lens of power and prestige, and the emergent narratives and practices of international solidarity that may propel further efforts for harm reduction and ethical accountability.

Conclusion

This narrative literature review critically explores the development and implications of the "AI cold war" narrative that feature prominently in discussions surrounding AI and international relations. It finds that the affirmative use of the AI cold war narrative in existing academic and policy literature is largely congruent with the securitisation of AI in political discourses, and broadly the balance of power perspective in understanding US-China relations resembling the neorealist power-based approach. The critique of the narrative in existing literature mostly focuses on the framing's characterisation of threat that may exaggerate Chinese capabilities, the vested interests of militarising Big Tech in pushing for the framing, and the negative consequences of reinforcing militarisation and racialised sentiments, impacts on research and ethics, international collaboration, and third countries' AI strategies. The binary focus on the US and China

as two AI superpowers vying for technology leadership also misrepresents the global distribution of AI capabilities, overlooking the roles of other major players such as the EU and AI developments in the rest of the world.

For future research, in addition to analysing the narratives and the implications for AI development, firm strategies, and relations between the US and China, scholars may examine AI strategies of major third-party economies like the EU and innovative middle powers like South Korea in the face of geopolitical tensions. While "technological sovereignty" is an often-used buzzword in third countries' AI policies, the reality is likely more complex, requiring in-depth research on how internal political economy and external security factors interact to influence technology policy development and implementation. As an increasing number of Global South countries are ramping up their AI development efforts, researchers may analyse unique local perspectives about security, economic and development interests and context-specific factors that may influence their national AI strategies and regionalisation efforts amidst shifting global geopolitics. Given the contestations and the limitations of the "cold war" framing outlined in this paper, researchers and practitioners may also reflect on the affective power of the narrative itself and explore other possible metaphors and narratives that can more fully capture the complexity of AI development beyond the state-centric binary power competition lens and the implications for international relations. These may include recognising the coexistence of technology competition and cooperation in AI governance, the efforts to localise AI development for non-western contexts and community interests, and the precarity and the contestations surrounding AI global value chains and emergent forms of international solidarity involving non-state actors.

For the broader debate in IR scholarship, this narrative review's findings echo the affirmations and the critiques surrounding the prevalent power-based neorealist framing of strategic competition and power transition.[172] Analytically, it heeds the call for a critical and reflective approach to explore narratives in IR scholarship.[173] The findings suggest that instead of accepting predominant framing and narratives like the "AI cold war" as is, scholars may probe and reflect upon how such narrative has been constructed, practised, and legitimised in policymaking and in scholarly knowledge production. This can provide the pathway for more grounded analytical work on the capabilities, strategies and influence of various state and non-state players in not just the US and China but also third-party economies. For practitioners, the findings also suggest the importance of diversifying narratives for emerging discussions on global AI governance.

For development scholars, this study's findings may also generate interests to contribute analysis of AI development needs, policies, and imaginaries that reorient our focus toward the Global South. Bareis & Katzenbach (2022)'s analysis of AI policy in the US, China, France and Germany, shows that "all establish AI as an inevitable and massively disrupting technological development by building on rhetorical devices such as a grand legacy and international competition", meanwhile their "respective AI imaginaries are remarkably different, reflecting the vast cultural, political, and economic differences of the countries."[174] As this review suggests, how Global South players' local and regional cultural, political and socioeconomic contexts influence the construction and the implementation of their local and regional AI strategies and imaginaries remain to be explored. As we reflect on the power of the narratives, we may also find new, potentially

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Navigating Multipolarity: Reimagining Process Design for Future Strategic Stability Frameworks

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Abstract: *As the international security landscape transitions from Cold War bipolarity to contemporary multipolarity, the classical paradigm of arms control is increasingly ill-suited to address emerging strategic challenges. The rise of China as a major military and nuclear power, the erosion of existing arms control agreements, the dysfunctional siloed (if not frozen) inter-state dialogues, and the proliferation of emerging and disruptive technologies collectively signal a breakdown of traditional strategic stability frameworks. This paper examines the theoretical limitations of mainstream schools of arms control and limitations of current diplomatic practice before arguing for a fundamental rethinking of process design in strategic stability negotiations. Drawing from the interdisciplinary field of peace process mediation, the paper identifies key variables—such as timing, dialogue formats, sequencing, diplomatic orchestration, and inclusivity—that can inform a more adaptive and process-oriented approach to great-power arms control. Rather than prescribing a fixed model, the paper advocates for a shift toward ecosystem-based, multi-track diplomatic strategies that incorporate lessons from conflict mediation to better navigate the complexity of modern multipolar deterrence relationships. Such radical reimagining is essential not only to reduce the risk of inadvertent escalation and an arms race, but also to generate new pathways toward more cooperative security among the United States, Russia, China, and beyond.*

In 1986, amidst the intense geopolitical rivalry of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union convened in Reykjavik, Iceland, to negotiate far-reaching nuclear arms control measures. Although they fell short of a comprehensive agreement, the summit marked a turning point in superpower diplomacy and offered a glimpse of what nuclear disarmament might achieve under a bipolar world order. Roughly forty years later, despite the once promising outlook for nuclear arms reduction in between, the geopolitical landscape has evolved to another level of uncertainty. The clear-cut standoff between two Cold War nuclear superpowers has given way to a multipolarising world filled with many new variables, among which the biggest one, arguably, is the rise of China.

China's economic growth has been unparalleled compared to any other country in the world, rising from 2.5% of global GDP in 1980 to over 18% in 2020 and simultaneously increasing from 6.7% to 68.8% relative to the US GDP within the same timeframe.[1] Regarding military power, China's advancement has been equally remarkable. By around 2020, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) had expanded to become the

largest navy globally in terms of warship count, with shipbuilding capabilities surpassing those of the United States.[2] All of these developments seemed to be waiting for another shockwave in the domain of strategic weapons, which finally arrived in the 2020s. Since the summer of 2021, over 300 silos that are believed to house intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) have been discovered in western China, prompting the US Department of Defense to speculate that China intends to shift away from its longstanding minimum deterrent strategy towards achieving nuclear parity with the United States and Russia. Combined with its largest intermediate-range missile arsenal in the world, the first deployment of operational hypersonic glide vehicles (HGVs) in the world, a steadily advancing space program, and cutting-edge capabilities in artificial intelligence (AI), China has become the most significant new variable in shaping the future strategic stability among big powers.

This strategic transformation coincides with the erosion of existing arms control frameworks. Key bilateral treaties between the US and Russia—such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and potentially the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START)—have collapsed or are at risk, while multilateral forums like the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) struggle to maintain credibility amidst great-power rivalry and emerging nuclear aspirants. Simultaneously, emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs)—including hypersonic weapons, space capabilities, and AI—are entangling conventional and nuclear domains, generating new escalation risks and rendering many Cold War-era concepts outdated.

Yet despite the magnitude of these shifts, the strategic stability literature and associated diplomatic processes have struggled to keep pace. Much of the existing theoretical work still centers on the Cold War dyad or overly relies on frameworks ill-suited to multipolar, multi-domain realities. While there has been a growing body of work on China's strategic rise and the implications of EDTs, relatively little attention has been given to the process design and sequencing necessary for building a new, inclusive, and sustainable strategic stability framework that incorporates both legacy nuclear actors and new variables like China, emerging technologies, and cross-domain entanglements.

This paper argues that addressing the current impasse in arms control requires not just a shift in substantive focus—from quantitative parity to qualitative risk reduction—but also a rethinking of the diplomatic process architecture through which strategic stability can be pursued. Rather than simply trying to retrofit Cold War-era models to contemporary realities, scholars and practitioners must consider alternative frameworks for structuring dialogue and negotiation. To that end, this paper proposes drawing insights from adjacent fields—particularly peace process mediation and conflict resolution—which offer tools for navigating complex, multi-actor, multi-issue environments.

By analysing existing theoretical schools of arms control, the evolution of diplomatic practice, and the lessons from other complex negotiation contexts, this study aims to open a debate on the pathways—sequenced, mediated, and pluralistic—through which future strategic stability might be reimagined. It does not propose a definitive model, but rather highlights the critical need for interdisciplinary thinking and process innovation

at a time when traditional arms control mechanisms appear increasingly inadequate to address 21st-century risks.

Literature Review and Challenges to Existing Theories

Arms Control: Main Schools of Thought

Arms control theories until the first decade of the 21st century, to our mind, can be roughly divided into two schools of thought. The first school—"classical school" so to be called in our paper—was born out of the discussions and writings in the Cambridge Community between 1958 and 1966.[3] In retrospect, one critical feature of this school is its endorsement of the international status quo, which is reflected by this school's general assumption that Russia had no interest in risking nuclear war to bring about drastic change in Europe or Asia.[4]

Scholars and practitioners of the classical school seek stability, and usually adopt strategic stability as their fundamental analytical framework. Although the term of strategic stability has no universally accepted definition and debates exist regarding the weight of various independent variables, in the arms control community, scholars and practitioners most often define it as the combination of crisis stability and arms race stability. Crisis stability refers to a status where neither state has an incentive to use nuclear weapons first in a crisis; arms race stability refers to a status where neither state has an incentive to engage in an arms race.[5]

Naturally, scholars and practitioners of this school of thought take arms control as an issue of calculation. Many core concepts of classical school and strategic stability, including unacceptable damage, mutual assured destruction, and mutual vulnerability, rely on technical calculations. Meanwhile, they argue for legally binding, verifiable treaties to implement these calculations. During and after the Cold War, a long list of scholars ranging from Hedley Bull and George Bunn to Thomas Graham Jr. and Michael Krepon primarily use this framework.

The second school of thought—"reformist school" in this paper—emerged during the Cold War era already. This school questions whether the classical school focuses too much on arms control itself that it deems arms control and maintaining status quo the natural end. For instance, in the 1970s, Bernard Brodie already argued that the "persistent failure to clarify and analyze objectives" was the main reason for the failure of most arms control work to be "of any utility for the policymaker."[6] Similarly, in the 1980s, James Barber argued that arms control and relevant treaties are possible means to several ends, but not the ends in themselves.[7]

With the international security status changing dramatically and the end of a bipolar system, scholars and practitioners of this school burgeoned and began to more actively redefine the goal of arms control—expanding from maintaining status quo and preventing nuclear wars to containing non-traditional issues such as terrorism and proliferation.[8] They criticised that the nuclear-weapons states remained entrenched in Cold War paradigms of threat and deterrence—hence the classically dogmatic calculation of strategic stability—and instead, stressed the need to reconsider the role of nuclear deterrence. One key argument is that with the bipolar system gone, the US

military preponderance creates the issue of inequality, which then forces actors outside of the US alliance to pursue asymmetrical deterrent strategies, including terrorism and proliferation. The solution that this school offered, in turn, is to reassure the disadvantaged and set the central goal of arms control not to deter but to reassure.[9]

Entering the New Era: Theoretical and Reality Challenges

The classical school of arms control theory provides a foundation for arms control analysis and is highly explanatory of US and Soviet arms control practices during the Cold War. For instance, this school explains the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty as a way to ensure states' second-strike capabilities and to reduce their desire for first strike by restricting missile defense systems; it also explains that the INF Treaty reduces the likelihood of theater-level crisis and arms racing by banning INF-range missiles altogether. However, the classical school is not suited to explain many arms control trends after the Cold War, such as the US's withdrawal from the ABM and INF treaties. It is fair to say that with the international system transitioning to a more complex polar structure and the China variable becoming increasingly significant as discussed in the previous section, the classical school theory that is rooted in the assumption that the world is in a bipolar system is gradually losing its relevance.

The reformist school was on the right track in adapting to the multipolarising world. However, when defining the international security priorities of the post-Cold War era, it made a shift that may be too big to the degree that traditional major-power stability is undervalued. It is true that in the years immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, proliferation and terrorism were the primary security threats to international security, but entering the 2010s, as major-power struggles began to resurface, the reformist school "suddenly" fell behind. This "falling behind" is particularly evident in the lack of systematic academic work of incorporating China into the international arms control mechanism. For years, for instance, in the academic discussions in European arms control communities, China was not even a topic; it was not until the 2020s when arms control seminars in Europe suddenly featured sessions on China.[10] In US institutions, things were slightly better, with individual arms control scholars such as Brad Roberts, Taylor Fravel, Tong Zhao, and Fiona Cunningham consistently studying China. However, despite the frequent calls from the US government, especially under President Trump, to address the China problem in the INF and New START treaties, few academic works that systematically incorporate China were proposed or elaborated.

Another key challenge facing both schools as well as all practitioners is the issue of entanglement, both on dual-use/conventional-nuclear entanglement and cross-domain entanglement. This by no means suggests that the two schools did not study this significant issue: the classical school did so by focusing on escalation ladders, crisis management, limited nuclear war, and nuclear brinkmanship,[11] whereas the reformists expanded the debate by incorporating threats posed by non-state actors and precision-guided weapons.[12] But it was not until the 2010s when a considerable amount of scholarly work discusses in detail the impact of EDTs such as hypersonic, cyber warfare, AI, space, and cross-domain hybrid operations on strategic stability.[13] This is understandable as many of these EDTs did only burgeon after the 2010s. However, despite the growing consensus among scholars and practitioners on incorporating these

factors into a strategic stability framework of our era, so far, these studies have largely fallen into arms control "silos", with limited depth on the broader process design and diplomatic sequencing required to foster a framework of this kind.

Current Challenges in Diplomatic Practice

There is broad acceptance also among diplomatic practitioners that a reimagining of a strategic stability framework is needed. In the current geopolitical context, with multiple treaties expiring or withdrawn and several nuclear weapon states building up their nuclear forces, it is fair to believe that the chapter of the (post-)Cold War arms control regime has closed and a new arms race is on the way. This section addresses the current challenges in diplomatic practice that impede any progress towards a future strategic stability framework.

The Multipolarity Puzzle in Strategic Stability Dialogues and Diplomacy

First of all, the format of multipolarity itself remains a puzzle. The multilateral platforms, the US-China-Russia triangular dynamics, the bilateral dynamics between these states, and their intersections are all parts of this puzzle. Currently, there is no vision of a meaningful diplomatic process; even at the most foundational level, bilateral diplomacy between the largest nuclear powers is stuck. This section addresses the challenges from the multilateral to the minilateral and the bilateral level. It will furthermore argue that there is a need to move beyond the old paradigm of the Cold War and re-imagine a multi-track process approach.

Multilateral and Minilateral Diplomacy

As multilateral arms control mechanisms are being significantly weakened due to great power competition, military build-ups, and the use of nuclear rhetoric in (potential) conflict, the current challenge to most diplomats around the world is to prevent a deterioration of the current regime. After all, the trend in our era has reversed from non-proliferation to proliferation: countries that feel threatened by neighbouring great powers and the breakdown of alliances are now debating acquiring or hosting a nuclear deterrent. Multilateral flagships such as the NPT are under pressure, and rounds of NPT PrepCom have failed to deliver any agreement, casting a shadow over the NPT RevCon 2026.

On the minilateral level, the P5 process—a mechanism set up in 2007 for the five permanent members of the UN Security Council—has only delivered nominal or signalling values in preserving the foundations of the NPT. Over the past nearly two decades, besides convening numerous dialogues on doctrines discussion, in terms of deliverables, the P5 process has only achieved a Glossary of Key Nuclear Terms and a Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races.[14] In other words, with geopolitical tensions running higher each year, the P5 process is unlikely to move the needle towards a new strategic stability framework.

<u>US-Russia-China Trilateral Talks</u>

Against the backdrop of rapidly deteriorating US-Russia and US-China relations, the first Trump Administration's National Security Strategy in 2017 described a return to great power competition. The US administration no longer welcomed a "stable and prosperous China"[15], but increasingly views China as a challenger to US economic and security interests globally, citing, amongst others, China's military modernisation and nuclear expansion. The US-Russia bilateral arms control frameworks further crumbled during the first Trump Administration, with the Trump Administration pulling out of the INF Treaty (citing Russian non-compliance and Chinese missile advantage) and dragging its feet in negotiations to extend New START beyond 2021. President Trump had insisted that China should be coming into the fold throughout the negotiations. In 2020, on the NPT's 50th anniversary, President Trump said that he would be proposing "a bold new trilateral arms control initiative with Russia and China to help avoid an expensive arms race and instead work together to build a better, safer, and more prosperous future for all."[16] The Biden Administration seemed to be more pragmatic vis-a-vis China in seeking bilateral arms control talks as Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and ensuing nuclear rhetoric had jeopardised arms control treaties and suspended US-Russia arms control talks. With the advent of the second Trump Administration, there seems to be a return to the rhetoric of President Trump's first term. Already in the first few weeks of the Trump Administration, President Trump has stated on several occasions his ambition of 'denuclearization'[17] because he does not want to enter into expensive (nuclear) arms races with either Russia or China.

It remains to be seen whether President Trump will be able to bring China to the table for trilateral arms control negotiations. China has persistently rejected a trilateral format because it insists that it is nowhere near on par with the US and Russia, and that it is the responsibility of the US and Russia to first bring their nuclear warheads down. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the US has a nuclear warhead stockpile of 3,708, the Russian Federation 4,380 and China of about 500.[18] Although experts often warn that China is quickly expanding and modernising, SIPRI estimates that "China's overall nuclear warhead stockpile is still expected to remain smaller than those states' [US, Russia] stockpiles."[19] In reply to Chinese arguments, US experts argue that it is not just about the numbers: China's rapid modernisation and nuclear expansion has a destabilising effect on global arms race stability[20] and any "arms control agreements that do not include China are incomplete, even if they provide for a measure of security and predictability in U.S.-Russian strategic relations"[21]. In addition, the US is increasingly questioning whether China's no first use (NFU) declaratory policy is credible and argues that China might be moving to a Launch-On-Warning posture.[22]

To promote strategic stability, especially in relation to arms race stability, it needs to involve at the very least the US, Russia, and China. However, the current geopolitical context makes it difficult to move to a trilateral format, and even if China agrees to come into the fold, it might be difficult to make meaningful progress on coming to a negotiated agreement in the near future. Only a few experts, such as Matthew Kroenig and Mark J. Massa, have made concrete proposals on how China could become part of a trilateral format taking China's concerns into consideration.[23] For example, they

consider a reduction of US and Russian warheads in exchange for a freeze of China's number of warheads, or a similar cap for all three, under which China could continue its nuclear buildup—but the US and Russia are unlikely to be satisfied as their relevant deterrent will be undermined. Another option would be a fissile material cut-off, for which China has only expressed conditional support as Beijing tends to link the issue with US missile defense and the weaponisation of outer space.[24] A revival of the INF Treaty in a trilateral format is also proposed, which Beijing is unlikely to accept without major US concessions as doing so would give up China's biggest advantage over the US in a Taiwan contingency and undermine the China-Russia balance.[25] The problem is that this approach towards achieving arms control frameworks is based on the old paradigm of Cold War-era arms control negotiations. With China—a country that lacks the long experience and culture of arms control negotiations—it is unlikely that replicating the same type of treaties and negotiation processes and simply adding China to the mix would work.

US-Russia

The US-Russia bilateral arms control framework is under serious pressure. Even before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, disagreements over geopolitical intentions, nuclear modernisation, missile defense, and mutual compliance issues had been building. The situation worsened sharply in 2022, leading to a near-complete freeze in formal dialogue, including their Strategic Stability Dialogue (SSD) and the Bilateral Consultative Commission (BCC) under the New START treaty. This was followed by the Russian suspension of its participation in the New START, which casts a shadow over the future after the treaty's expiration in February 2026.

Whether the US and Russia will extend or reinvent the treaty remains uncertain. As of early 2025, practitioners and scholars generally do not see the treaty's extension before its expiration as possible. Despite President Trump's pro-denuclearisation rhetoric after he returned to the White House, Moscow considers the prospects for amending and extending the treaty bleak.[26] Regarding the likelihood of reinventing the treaty or, at the very least, of both Russia and the US voluntarily keeping their strategic weapons under the limit, several factors complicate the issue.

First, on a structural level, Moscow does not see the value-added of compartmentalising the nuclear issue anymore. The post-Cold War geopolitical landscape is perceived as unfavourable to Russia. As a result, Moscow prefers issue linkage, combining nuclear arms control with geopolitical issues such as the future of Ukraine and settlement with NATO expansion. Second, Russia's self-perceived disadvantageous position and weakened conventional forces also make it more likely to rely on nuclear weapons rather than restrain its nuclear program. The same preference for reliance applies to EDTs, which, in theory, should be added to future US-Russia arms control negotiations to reflect EDT's impact on strategic stability.

Even if Washington and Moscow manage to resolve the abovementioned difficulties, technical issues still remain. Missile defense alone already looms large. For years, Washington has been reluctant to restrain its missile defense development and deployment, which deeply worries Moscow. The dynamics brought by the second

Trump Administration do not seem to provide any relief either: one of the very first executive orders issued by President Trump in 2025 aims to build the "Golden Dome" missile defense system to shield the continental US.

US-China

In contrast to the US and Russia, the US and China do not have experience of engaging in bilateral arms control frameworks. "Since the end of the Cold War, every US president has reached out to China in a bid to improve the strategic military relationship—and each has been rebuffed."[27] However, the two countries now have over 15 years of experience engaging in formal (though not sustained) and informal dialogues which started in the 2000s, most notably through the Track 1.5 "China-US Strategic Nuclear Dynamics Dialogue"[28] which were convened in Beijing and Hawaii twice a year over the course of 15 years until it was suspended in 2019 due to a loss of forward momentum.[29]

As US-China relations deteriorated over the last decade, so did the Track 1.5 dialogue become increasingly a talk shop without any progress towards any substantive confidence-building measures or arms control negotiations. [30] This is to the frustration of US officials and experts. It was believed that the Chinese government was using informal dialogue spaces to avoid sustained official nuclear dialogue.[31] In the first Trump Administration, US-China relations took a turn for the worse. Even though the Trump Administration intended to bring China into trilateral talks, few official dialogues took place in 2018,[32] and almost all informal dialogues were discontinued. Prior to the Biden and Xi meeting in Woodside in November 2023, a one-off dialogue between US and Chinese officials took place in Washington. While Biden and Xi agreed at the Woodside Summit to continue high-level diplomacy and interactions, including on the issue of arms control and non-proliferation,[33] China declined to schedule a subsequent meeting, and in July 2024, Beijing officially declared that these talks were suspended due to US arms sales to Taiwan.

Therein lies the crux for US-China dialogues: the Chinese have in recent years asserted a conditionality of convening official strategic stability dialogue on the temperature in the broader relationship, with strategic stability talks a "carrot" to give or take away from the Americans (citing "mutual respect" and China's "core interests"). The US, on the other hand, has thus far asserted that strategic stability dialogue is compartmentalised and should not be linked to good bilateral ties, with the logic that the need for strategic stability conversations is greater when bilateral relations sour. This is evident in the way "strategic stability" is perceived by both sides. While neither side officially defines the concept, the US generally perceives strategic stability as crisis stability and arms race stability, whereas it seems in the Track 1.5 dialogue that China views the term as a much broader concept related to its national security.[34][35] In essence, both concepts make sense: sustained stability in the Taiwan Strait and other flashpoints diminishes the risk of conventional military conflict, thereby lowering the risk of crossing the nuclear threshold or inadvertent escalation. Conversely, even—and particularly—within the context of an adversarial and competitive bilateral relationship, both parties retain a strategic incentive to avoid nuclear escalation and therefore engage in nuclear risk prevention and escalation management.

Even if the number of dialogues grows, the question of how to go beyond an exchange of positions remains. Several participants in the Hawaii-Beijing dialogue have argued that at the very minimum, the value of the Track 1.5 space is to advance a common strategic language and avoid misperceptions and misunderstandings.[36] However, moving towards confidence-building measures requires Track-1 talks, and usually involves a degree of transparency and crisis management measures, both of which have seemed difficult for China. China has perceived US calls for transparency to be disingenuous in the absence of nuclear parity, as transparency would threaten the survivability and credibility of China's limited nuclear deterrent.[37] Measures related to crisis management might sound more feasible but have run into obstacles, because Chinese military doctrine is generally confident in being able to effectively control a crisis from escalating.[38]

Academics and experts have weighed in on how to unlock a meaningful US-China dialogue with practical suggestions. Tong Zhao, for example, has made several suggestions of short-term cooperative measures such as the US and Russia jointly briefing the Chinese on confidence-building measures or inviting the Chinese to mock verification inspections.[39] On the Chinese side, scholars stress the importance of resuming Track 2 and Track 1.5 dialogue with a focus on confidence-building measures and promoting crisis stability, arguing that the time is not right for nuclear disarmament talks.[40] During the official US-China (one-off) dialogue in November 2023, the US made three proposals for strategic risk reduction to the Chinese delegation, to which the Chinese side did not respond: a strategic crisis hotline between strategic commands, missile launch notifications, and measures for space deconfliction.[41] However, in September 2024 China notified the US in advance of an ICBM test to avoid miscalculation.[42] The prospect for substantive progress towards confidence-building measures and nuclear risk reduction is low and would require longer-term sustained Track 1 dialogue. There is even a slimmer chance of any progress on arms control or a strategic stability framework through a US-China dialogue.

Russia-China

In discussions around future arms control agreements or frameworks, academics and experts usually focus on the trilateral, the US-Russia bilateral, or the US-China bilateral. However, in any future strategic stability framework that involves at least the three great powers, it is essential to consider the Russia-China dynamics as well.

While Russia and China historically exhibited an awkward relationship marked by mutual suspicion—stemming from territorial disputes, ideological debates, and competing regional ambitions—as of late 2010s they have managed to find a pragmatic alignment based on shared strategic interests, achieving "its best in history."[43] At present, they both share a common interest to resist the US hegemonic position in the world, but whereas Russia intends to sabotage the US-led global order, China has benefited from the current order and merely hopes to re-furbish it into something more benign to itself. This is an important distinction because it has profound implications for their approach to strategic stability and mechanisms such as the NPT.

One reflection of this distinction on the nuclear postures of Russia and China, for instance, is that Russia is willing to integrate nuclear options into its means of projecting power against the West (such as voicing nuclear threats and, after the Kremlin revised its doctrine in late 2024, reserving options of nuclear use in response to non-nuclear weapons threats to Russia and its allies), whereas China so far has maintained a limited, defensive posture (unconditional no-first-use policy and negative security assurance). This distinction can also be observed in their respective quantity of deployed warheads: according to SIPRI Yearbook 2025, Russia has 1718, same level as the US, whereas China has 24.[44] This divergence means that while both Russia and China rhetorically oppose US hegemony, they have limited common ground when it comes to the fundamental principles of nuclear deterrence and escalation control, making it difficult for Moscow and Beijing to agree on a strategic arms control framework that would require aligning on what constitutes an acceptable nuclear posture.

Chinese and Russian differing stances on the overseas deployment of nuclear weapons and extended deterrence—also a reflection of Russia's power projection versus China's declared defensive posture—may also in the long run affect how China and Russia coordinate their positions at the NPT. So far, due to the shared interest in countering the US, China has turned a blind eye to Russia for deploying warheads in Belarus and instead only criticising the US, but given time, this fundamental difference may hinder their dynamics at the NPT.

The Impact of Emerging Technologies and Conventional-Nuclear Entanglement

Arms control is not just a multi-player but also a multi-domain puzzle. Any future strategic stability framework will probably be unsustainable if it deals with nuclear capabilities alone in a quantitative-based approach only. As described earlier, there is currently an academic and expert debate about the impact of emerging technologies such as AI on strategic stability and arms control.[45] Many experts and scholars grapple with understanding the many ways that the transformative nature of these technologies (might) impact both nuclear command, control and communications, as well as how their integration in conventional weapons might exacerbate the risk of inadvertent escalation through conventional-nuclear entanglement.[46] For example, an accident or a conventional attack on a satellite could unintentionally damage an adversary's nuclear command or early-warning systems, possibly leading to the perception that it was an intentional strike aimed at disabling their nuclear capabilities or even interpreted as a prelude to a nuclear attack. Another destabilising effect arises from AI-enabled intelligence gathering. Whether through analysing vast amounts of satellite imagery to detect and track mobile missiles or nuclear silos, or using maritime sensors to monitor nuclear-armed submarines,[47] such technologies undermine the geographical ambiguity of nuclear weapons, thereby compromising a country's second-strike capability. The integration of emerging technologies in the military domain could also "shape the more structural features of the nuclear balance that fall under the banner of strategic stability"[48], because the mainstreaming of AI in military applications will have a profound impact on force structure and posture and therefore on strategic calculations.[49] While the war in Ukraine has been a "preview of ways that emerging technologies could contribute to escalation in the future both before or during conflicts", much remains

hypothetical and we are yet to witness the full extent to which the advancement and integration of new technologies will impact the nuclear domain and strategic stability more broadly.

Bearing in mind this uncertainty and much-debated hypothetical scenarios, it becomes difficult to integrate this as a variable into any future strategic stability framework. Yet, it is imperative that it is addressed before it has been adopted and integrated without restraint. The stakes are high, as it is widely believed that U.S.-China competition is increasingly playing out in the technological domain due to a shared belief that future warfare and global dominance will hinge on technological supremacy. This trend is manifesting in areas such as AI models, quantum computing, cyber warfare, and semiconductors, with both nations investing heavily in emerging technologies as a way to secure strategic advantage.

There is fortunately a proliferation of summits and Track 1.5/Track 2 dialogues that address AI safety and governance,[50] and some initial steps to integrate these questions in broader strategic stability discussions. However, we cannot envision a future strategic stability framework without any agreement on certain restraints on the adoption of disruptive technologies in the nuclear and nuclear-adjacent domain.

Learning from the Complexity of Peace Processes

Academic debate has focused on the only framework of reference for arms control it knows: the Cold War and post-Cold War arms control negotiations, bilateral treaties and multilateral frameworks. This paradigm is unfit for purpose. There is a need for a discussion on how to navigate multipolarity in a future process towards a strategic stability framework involving, at the very least, the US, Russia, and China. This discussion also needs to cover the scope of such a future strategic stability framework—considering whether such future strategic stability, both crisis and arms race stability, should include also (elements of) new domains such as the yet unknown future implications of AI, quantum, or outer space. Without being prescriptive on process design, this paper argues that the arms control community should move beyond an analysis of the complexity of the current geopolitical landscape and beyond a debate on confidence-building measures in each of these dialogue settings. The multi-player cross-domain complexity requires a radical re-imagination of a process that can lead to a future strategic stability framework. This could at the very least reduce the risk of (inadvertent) escalation and perhaps even reverse the trend towards proliferation and a (nuclear) arms race.

Rather than focusing on historical case studies of arms control, there might be value in an interdisciplinary approach. There is a large body of literature focused on peace processes, armed conflict resolution and mediation that addresses process design and sequencing in a complex context with a high number of players and issues that interact with each other. Most of these studies analyse past peace processes to distill theoretical frameworks and causal relations of factors of the process, players, etc., on the outcomes of the negotiations. There are a number of important aspects arising from this epistemic community that could be studied further in how it could be applied to dialogues towards a future strategic stability framework.

Timing

There is, first of all, the question of timing, to assess whether a conflict is ripe or ready to be negotiated. Based on the current geopolitical situation and the obstacles in the multilateral, trilateral, and bilateral dialogue settings, many in the arms control community have concluded that the time is not right for trilateral disarmament and arms control talks. Scholars of peace processes have debated the "ripeness" or "readiness" of a conflict to be negotiated, meaning, according to Zartman's foundational work, that all sides recognise that continuing the hostilities would be more detrimental to their interests than resolving the conflict[51]. Numerous scholars have critiqued or elaborated upon this theory because peace negotiations often have many drivers of complexity[52] (e.g., parties are non-monolithic, have fundamentally different worldviews, etc.), making it difficult to understand when a conflict might be ripe or ready to be negotiated. It would be helpful to build on this body of analysis and apply it to strategic stability. Would the US, Russia, China (and others) be ready or ripe for a negotiated agreement as all sides stand to gain more from a negotiated arms control agreement than continuing down a path that leads to a new (nuclear) arms race?

Dialogue Setting and Mediators

Second, even if the parties would rationally stand to benefit from arms control (because an arms race is expensive and brings instability and volatility), it might be difficult to overcome the gridlock in their dialogue settings. President Trump's unconventional approach might provide new impetus to initial US-Russia talks, but it remains to be seen whether the Trump Administration (and beyond) can sustain a dialogue process towards a new strategic stability framework.

In national or regional peace processes, there is often a type of third-party mediator or facilitator to guide the conflict parties in a dialogue process. When it comes to arms control negotiations, there has historically been a more limited role for a third party to mediate, facilitate, or at the very least provide good offices to the parties. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, UN Secretary General U Thant facilitated a communication channel for the US and the USSR to walk back tensions and come to an agreement to resolve issues that laid the foundations for future US-USSR arms control negotiations.[53] However, in subsequent negotiations during the Cold War, the US and USSR preferred to negotiate through direct talks without a mediator influencing the agenda or the outcomes, though countries including Switzerland and Iceland provided good offices and neutral venues.

Great powers are understandably hesitant to allow mediation or facilitation by third parties on such sensitive issues at the heart of national security. However, as is demonstrated by literature from peace process mediation, many different roles for a mediator could be envisioned that might be helpful in overcoming the complexity of multipolarity or even the gridlock in bilateral dialogues. The arms control community could focus on lessons from successful and unsuccessful mediators in international peace processes or even past arms control negotiations and discuss how these might inform and envision the role and setup of a mediator in the current context.

One could, for example, envision how a set of co-mediators (e.g. retired diplomats or influential individuals with close ties to leaders) could work in parallel and complementarily to do initial scoping consultations with the US, Russia, and China—not for trilateral talks but parallel discussions. It is possible that great powers would be reluctant to embrace the role of a third party and that it would take a crisis like the Cuban Missile Crisis to demonstrate that they are on the brink of a precipice and need a third-party actor to help them get down the escalation ladder. A historical instance is that U Thant provided a backchannel through which the US and the Soviet Union de-escalated. In addition to the role of Track 1 mediators, one could also conceive of a third-party role of Track 1.5 and Track 2 interlocutors whose interactions could overcome entrenched positions and achieve more constructive and creative outcomes. Their way of overcoming entrenched positions may include: re-framing issues (some terms date back to the Cold War but may need to be re-framed to adjust to the contemporary reality), creating backchannels for direct or indirect messaging, and facilitating workshops or discussions that are focused on specific technical problems.

Sequencing

Another aspect to consider more in-depth is the strategy of sequencing in peace processes[54], specifically the chronological sequencing and the sequencing across different geographic and thematic settings, as well as across different levels. Instead of focusing on measures to "unlock" the stalemate in each dialogue channel separately, all of the above-described channels (trilateral, US-Russia, US-China, Russia-China, etc.) could be seen as an ecosystem of dialogue processes where, through sequencing of steps in each of these channels and perhaps linking of issues across (e.g. technology and arms control), one can move towards breakthroughs in other channels. Issue linkage in peace processes has also been used to create strategic incentives for each party to engage, making the conflict "ripe" for mediation.[55] The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks Agreement (SALT I) and the ABM treaty provide an example of issue linkage in the nuclear context. Washington hoped to limit the large-scale deployment of ICBMs and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) by the Soviet Union, whereas Moscow worried that the US ABM system would weaken the Soviet nuclear deterrent. In the end, two issues were linked, and both sides bundled "limitations on offensive weapons" (the interim SALT I agreement) together with "limitations on anti-ballistic missiles" (the ABM Treaty) into a single package deal.

In studying sequencing strategies in international peace negotiations, many have focused on the gradualist approach of US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in the Middle East, where the parties in an intractable conflict start with the easier issues and gradually move to the more difficult topics. This has been the approach taken in, at the very least, by the US vis-a-vis China in proposing confidence-building measures aimed at reducing risk without restraining China in its capability development or deployment (e.g., launch notification mechanism). The disadvantage to the gradualist approach is that the slow-moving process gives spoilers free play to destroy trust, and it will eventually undermine the support from the engagers and unravel any trust that has been gained.[56] This has arguably happened in the US-China dialogue space. For example, after 15 years of the Track 1.5 dialogue organised in Beijing and Hawaii, it was suspended in 2019 due to loss of momentum[57]—the US blamed the Chinese for

not progressing towards an official nuclear dialogue, and the Chinese side blamed the Trump Administration for poisoning the overall bilateral relationship.[58]

However, a gradualist approach is not the only one. Rather than starting small, one could also tackle the most difficult issue first (the "boulder on the road" approach), or negotiating all issues at once but in parallel working groups.[59] Adopting the "boulder on the road" strategy might in this case mean discussing a grand nuclear bargain, or talking about denuclearisation, or a big-for-big trade-off across security issues (e.g. Chinese INF-range missile reductions in exchange for limitation of US deployment of INF-range missiles and missile defense systems in Asia). The latter approach, using parallel working groups, would in turn be suited for negotiating parallel but linked issues such as nuclear modernisation and expansion in one group and emerging technologies and missile defense in other groups. Another approach to consider is the "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed" concept, whereby all issues remain on the table until all aspects are agreed. This approach would allow for parallel negotiations on issues that might be strategically linked, such as nuclear agreements and limitations on missile defense systems. Lastly, and in contrast, one could also conceive of a sequencing of smaller pre-agreed steps (a roadmap) towards a grand bargain-like framework of agreements, whereby each side takes smaller steps and only moves forward to the next phase once they have verified the reciprocity of the other side(s). The approaches and examples mentioned here are not exhaustive but merit a more in-depth debate.

Diplomatic Orchestration

In addition to considering the sequencing of efforts over time and across diverse geographic settings, it is also important to examine the interplay and complementarity of different diplomatic tracks, adopting a "systems approach"[60] that spans Track 1, Track 1.5, and Track 2 dialogues. Each of these tracks offers distinct advantages and challenges. Track 2 presents an opportunity for greater experimentation and the incubation of ideas, and it fosters trust-building and the development of a shared understanding and vocabulary. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that Track 2 participants, while instrumental in shaping ideas, are generally not decision-makers. As the Beijing-Hawaii Track 1.5 demonstrated, the functionality of that dialogue space eventually withered as no ideas were transferred to a (sustained) Track 1 dialogue. This transfer of ideas and momentum between the Track 1.5 and Track 2 spaces is essential in peace processes, yet it has proven to be a persistent challenge, particularly in the context of US-China relations. Having Track 2 participants with close links to officials might help the transfer of ideas but is likely to constrain them in thinking beyond entrenched positions.[61]

While Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues have been widely employed in the realms of arms control and non-proliferation, their creative potential and flexible format may not have been fully realised. A third-party facilitator or mediator in the Track 1.5/2 space might allow participants to move beyond entrenched positions. Track 2 also offers a valuable platform to bring in participants with more diverse backgrounds and to explore the intersectionality between nuclear issues and related domains, providing an opportunity for cross-disciplinary engagement. There is also a need for officials on all sides to recognise the value of sustained Track 1.5 and Track 2 engagement, including the potential to direct or mandate Track 2 participants to address specific issues, contribute to process design, conduct tabletop exercises, and other related activities.

<u>Inclusivity</u>

Lastly, it should also be debated whether the future strategic stability framework is to be decided by US, China and Russia as main actors. Drawing a parallel to peace processes, there is always the question about inclusivity and how to draw on and represent the perspectives of those not in power or holding weapons. Drawing on the issue of inclusivity in peace processes, it might lead to a more durable outcome[62] but with the risk of fragmenting and pro-longing or overcomplicating the process.[63] In the context of strategic stability, one could ask whether there could be a role for non-nuclear weapon states with a convening and agenda-setting influence or regional nuclear weapon states such as India, France, etc. For example, some European countries currently hold Track 1 and Track 2 dialogues with China on arms control and non-proliferation and could use these channels to test the waters on some confidence-building measures. Having a minilateral or multilateral group of countries support the efforts of the US, China, and Russia might create more legitimacy and could play a role in any framework that includes issue linkage with regional security. Their involvement might also be necessary in issues that transcend the nuclear domain, e.g., on emerging technologies. Secondly, it should be considered how to include the views, through consultative processes, of private sector companies regarding technological advancements, the integration of emerging technologies into military capabilities, and their impact on arms control.

In summary, drawing on case studies and research from the field of peace process mediation could help reinvigorate the debate on process design within the arms control community. While this paper does not aim to provide an exhaustive overview or prescribe a specific direction for this debate, it seeks to highlight key factors worth considering.

Conclusion

The classical school of arms control theory, which effectively explains and guided US-Soviet arms control practices during the Cold War, is becoming increasingly less relevant as the international system evolves into a more complex, multipolar structure, with China playing a larger role. The reformist school has overemphasised emerging threats such as proliferation and terrorism and has thus far not addressed the return of major-power rivalry in the 2010s. Recent scholarship has started to address the impact of emerging and disruptive technologies on strategic stability. Furthermore, there are myriad challenges in diplomatic efforts to address the great-power rivalry and the onset of a new arms race. Even at the most foundational level, bilateral diplomacy between the largest nuclear powers is stuck. There is a need to move beyond the old paradigm of the Cold War and discuss the re-imagining of a multi-track process approach.

This paper did not prescribe a magic formula or a roadmap for a future strategic stability framework or arms control agreements in a multipolar world. However, it was intended to highlight the need for an academic and expert debate on process design for strategic stability negotiations. Promoting a scholarly and think tank debate on possible roadmaps to a negotiated agreement will also help policymakers on each side. Even if the outcomes of future negotiated agreements remain unknown, encouraging scholars to hear the full breadth of options might debunk group thinking in Beijing that arms

control only serves to constrain China into a position of complete weakness vis-à-vis the United States. Similarly, exploring a wide range of frameworks could dispel entrenched assumptions in the White House that strategic stability can only be preserved through overwhelming deterrence, which might open space for more flexible approaches to arms control—ones that do not automatically equate restraint with vulnerability. At the same time, weighing the full spectrum of proposals may erode the prevailing narrative in the Kremlin that arms control is merely a Western tactic to undermine Russia's strategic parity, which could invite a more pragmatic discussion about mutual security interests in an evolving multipolar order.

Notes

1. World Bank Group, "GDP (Current US$): United States," accessed July 10, 2025, https://data.world-bank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?end=2023&locations=US&start=1980; and "GDP (Current US$): China," accessed July 10, 2025, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN.

2. Brad Lendon, "Expert's Warning to US Navy on China: Bigger Fleet Almost Always Wins," CNN, January 17, 2023, https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/16/asia/china-navy-fleet-size-history-victory-intl-hnk-ml/index.html

3. The host institutions were mostly located in Cambridge, MA such as Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, hence the name.

4. Jennifer E. Sims, "The American Approach to Nuclear Arms Control: A Retrospective," Daedalus 120, no. 1 (1991): 261–62.

5. Richard Haass and David M. Lampton, Enhancing U.S.-China Strategic Stability in an Era of Strategic Competition (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, April 2021), 13, https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/04/enhancing-us-china-strategic-stability-era-strategic-competition .

6. Bernard Brodie, "On the Objectives of Arms Control," International Security 1, no.1 (1976): 17.

7. James A. Barber, "The Objectives of Arms Control," International Law Studies 62 (1980): 443-44.

8. Joseph S. Nye, "Arms Control and International Politics," Daedalus 120, no.1 (1991): 145-165; Nina Tannenwald, "US Arms Control Policy in a Time Warp," Ethics & International Affairs 15, no.1 (2001): 51-70; Thomas Graham, "Strengthening Arms Control," The Washington Quarterly 23, no.2 (2000): 183-196.

9. John Steinbruner, "Renovating Arms Control Through Reassurance," The Washington Quarterly 23, no. 2 (2000): 201–222; Tannenwald, "US Arms Control Policy in a Time Warp," 51-55.

10. According to the authors' conversation with several senior European experts on arms control and non-proliferation who conduct research at renowned European think tanks.

11. See Herman Kahn, On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios (New York: Praeger, 1965); Thomas C. Schelling, Arms and Influence (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966); John J. Mearsheimer, Conventional Deterrence (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

12. Paul Wilkinson, "Nuclear Weapons and Non-State Actors: The Evolving Threat of Nuclear Terrorism," in Handbook of Nuclear Proliferation, ed. Harsh V. Pant (New York: Routledge, 2009), 183–205; Bruce G. Blair, The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1995); Bruce G. Blair, "Loose Nukes, Nuclear Command and Control, and Strategic Stability," Survival 43, no. 3 (2001): 27–43.

13. Brad Roberts, The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); James Acton, Escalation through Entanglement: How Vulnerability of Command-and-Control Systems Raises the Risks of an Inadvertent Nuclear War (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Escalation_Acton_Web.pdf; Elbridge Colby, The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021); Vipin Narang and Scott D. Sagan, The Fragile Balance of Terror: Deterrence in the New Nuclear Age (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022); Fiona S. Cunningham, "The Dynamics of an Entangled Security Dilemma: China's Changing Nuclear Posture," International Security 47, no. 4 (2023): 147–87.

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Religious Nationalism in the New Cold War

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Abstract: *Thirty years ago I published a book with the title, The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State. At the time it seemed a startling proposition that religion could play a role in a new kind of anti-secular authoritarian politics. Now, thirty years later, the theme has returned with the potency of right-wing power, anti-immigrant hate and economic isolationism. Religion continues to be part of the equation in the current dichotomy between democracy and authoritarianism, where religion is often a way to connect a powerful state to the masses, as witnessed in Turkey, Hungary, Russia, India, and now the United States. This article will take several themes from my book and apply them to these contemporary examples. I will assess whether religious nationalism has changed and expanded, and whether it has a future.*

The recent political shifts on a global scale have led many observers to conclude that we are on the verge of a new Cold War. But it is not clear what the opposing sides are, nor how they are constituted. Some observers point to the rising tension between the United States and China as a new point of contestation. It is a conflict, to be sure, but it is essentially a bipolar one. To be a new Cold War, one would expect each side to have a global reach, and present opposing ideological bases for organising public life.

What is emerging at this point in the third decade of the 21st century as an opposition on a global scale is the conflict between democracy and autocracy. Like the old Cold War, the states on either side do not always agree with one another. The Soviet Union and China were uneasy partners in the Communist bloc. But they leaned on each other for support in times when they had to face their ideological opponents—democratic capitalism in the case of the Communist partners. In an eerie way, global politics seems to be lining up in a similar kind of mass dichotomy between two uneasy though warring camps.

The rise of authoritarian nationalism in recent years has been remarkable. The increasing control of Xi in China, the ascension of Putin as a Russian dictator, the emergence of Erdogan and al-Sisi as the strong men of Turkey and Egypt; the rigid regimes of North Korea, Iran, and Saudi Arabia; the dominance of Modi in India; and the authoritarian tendencies of the Trump administration in the United States provide a counterweight to what was once a near-global acceptance of democracy.

Though hounded by autocratic right-wing parties, the democratic spirit still thrives in the Center-Left coalition of American politics and in the democratic administrations in Japan and Europe, elsewhere in the Americas, and in much of Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific. The autocratic and democratic sides are by no means united within themselves except in their persistence in the differing tracks on which they have traveled. And the confrontation is nearly global.

The stance of Trump in disdaining traditional European democracies in favor of the autocracies of Russia, Hungary, Turkey, and even North Korea is an example of these new alliances.. Perhaps nothing illustrated the emerging autocratic coalition more than the extraordinary lineup at the September 2025 meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. On the final day, China's Xi stood side by side with Russia's Putin and North Korea's Kim. Also in attendance were India's Modi, Egypt's al-Sisi, and Turkey's Erdogan.

What is particularly interesting to me, as someone who has observed the global connections between religion and politics over my now long career, is the role of religion in this new Cold War. The stance of religious leaders has been varied, and many have been critical of the rise of autocratic dictatorships. Yet many of the new autocracies are openly built on religious nationalism.

The drift towards autocratic religious nationalisms is a development that has been several decades in the making. But it is striking to see it emerge as a dominant force in many of the present confrontations. In Russia, for instance, Putin leans on the Russian Orthodox church and its Patriarch Kirill for support. The regime of Saudi Arabia has built its power on the religious network of Wahhabi Islam, just as Iran's theocracy is based on Shi'a institutions. In India, Modi wears his Hindu identity strongly, and his political party is based on an old Hindu nationalist movement that dates to the beginning of India's Independence movement. The support of Evangelical Protestant Christians in the United States has given Trump his strongest base. Religion is part of the emerging autocracies of the new Cold War.

At one time, I thought that it might be one side of a cold war, the conflict between religious and secular nationalism. Thirty years ago, I published a book with the title, The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State.[1] At the time, it seemed a startling proposition that religion could play a role in a new kind of anti-secular authoritarian politics. Religion was, however, a significant part of the power politics of the Middle East, and religious nationalism was emerging as the rival to secular democracy in other parts of the world as well.

Fifteen years later, the book was completely rewritten and reissued with the title Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State.[2] The reason for the change in title was that the revised book covered a wide range of non-state movements, some of them transnational, such as al Qaeda. The role of religion in these oppositional politics was a potent force, but it was scattered among a broad range of movements. At the time, it seemed less like a global confrontation in the way that a Cold War would suggest, and more like a global rebellion.

Today's situation provides yet another context for thinking about the role of religion in global conflict. My original title, "the new Cold War," again appears to be prescient. It is not, however, the way that I originally thought, or as I later revised my thinking. It is not that religious nationalism itself is one side of the confrontation or that it foments rebellions, but that it plays a significant role in buttressing the power and providing the mobilising force of dictatorial regimes in the emerging global conflict of the present: the new Cold War between autocracy and democracy.

Hence, thirty years after I first published The New Cold War?, the theme has returned. Religion provides the potency to shore up right-wing power, anti-immigrant hate, and economic isolationism, and for that reason it is part of the equation in the current dichotomy between democracy and authoritarianism. For strongman regimes in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Hungary, Russia, India, and now the United States, religion is often a way to connect the masses to a powerful state.

Interestingly, some of the insights in my previous book continue to be relevant. Through a series of case studies and interviews, that book helps me explore answers to the question of why religion provides such a heady resource for political mobilisation.

The Loss of Faith in Secular Democracy

One of the reasons why religion plays a role in the confrontation between democracy and autocracy is that it replaces a faith in secular democracy. I use the term "faith" deliberately, since the idea of secular democracy requires a great deal of faith. Not faith in religion, of course, but faith in the promise of democracy itself: that the individual needs and wishes of a vast citizenry could be knit together by an "unseen hand," as Adam Smith described the workings of capitalism, to create a polity for the welfare of all. The problem was that invariably the system became used and abused in a way that profited the few at the expense of the many. Even so, it did a better job of equality than, say, an oligarchy might, which was exclusively for the benefit of the rich. Still, democratic nationalism appeared to be less than perfect.

Secular nationalists had tried to argue that faith in democracy was preferable to faith in autocratic religion. The words used to define nationalism by Western political leaders and such scholars as Hans Kohn implied not only that it was secular but that it was competitive with religion and ultimately superior to it. "Nationalism [by which he meant secular nationalism] is a state of mind," Kohn wrote, "in which the supreme loyalty of the individual is felt to be due the nation-state."[3] And he boldly asserted that secular nationalism had replaced religion in its influence: "An understanding of nationalism and its implications for modern history and for our time appears as fundamental today as an understanding of religion would have been for thirteenth century Christendom."[4]

Rupert Emerson's influential From Empire to Nation, written several years later, shared the same exciting vision of a secular nationalism that "sweeps out [from Europe] to embrace the whole wide world."[5] Emerson acknowledged, however, that although in the European experience "the rise of nationalism [again, secular nationalism] coincided with a decline in the hold of religion," in other parts of the world, such as Asia, as secular nationalism "moved on" and enveloped these regions, "the religious issue pressed more

clearly to the fore again." Nonetheless, he anticipated that the "religious issue" would never again impede the progress of secular nationalism, which he saw as the West's gift to the world. The feeling that in some instances this gift had been forced on the new nations without their asking was noted by Emerson, who acknowledged that "the rise of nationalism among non-European peoples" was a consequence of "the imperial spread of Western European civilization over the face of the earth." The outcome, in his view, was nonetheless laudable: "With revolutionary dynamism . . . civilization has thrust elements of essential identity on peoples everywhere. . . . The global impact of the West has . . . run common threads through the variegated social fabrics of mankind, . . . [and it] has scored an extraordinary triumph."[6]

When Kohn and Emerson used the term nationalism, they had in mind not just a secular political ideology and a religiously neutral national identity but a particular form of political organisation: the modern European and American nation-state. In such an organisation, individuals are linked to a centralised, all-embracing democratic political system that is unaffected by any other affiliations, be they ethnic, cultural, or religious. That linkage is sealed by an emotional sense of identification with a geographical area and a loyalty to a particular people, an identity that is part of the feeling of nationalism. This affective dimension of nationalism is important to keep in mind, especially in comparing secular nationalism with religion. In the 1980s, the social theorist Anthony Giddens described nationalism in just this way—as conveying not only the ideas and "beliefs" about political order but also the "psychological" and "symbolic" element in political and economic relationships.[7] Scholars such as Kohn and Emerson recognised this affective dimension of nationalism early on; they felt it appropriate that the secular nation adopt what we might call the spirit of secular nationalism.

The Religious Rejection of Secular Democracy

Democratic secular nationalism is "a kind of religion," one of the leaders of the Iranian revolution wrote in a matter-of-fact manner that indicated that what he said was taken as an obvious truth by most of his readers.[8] He went on to explain that it was not only a religion but one peculiar to the West, a point echoed by one of the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.[9] Behind his statement was the assumption that secular democracy fulfills the same needs for collective identity, ultimate loyalty, and moral authority that religion has traditionally addressed, and this parallel makes secular nationalism de facto a religion. Other Muslim thinkers said that secular nationalism in the West occupies the same place in human experience as does Islam in Muslim societies, Buddhism in Theravada Buddhist societies, and Hinduism and Sikhism in Indian society. Thus, it is a religion in the same sense as Islam, Theravada Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism. One might as well call it Christian or European cultural nationalism, they declare, and make clear what seems to many Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs to be perfectly obvious: that it competes in every way with religion as they know it.

Behind this charge is a certain vision of social reality, one that involves a series of concentric circles. The smallest circles are families and clans; then come ethnic groups and nations; the largest, and implicitly most important, are global civilisations. Among the global civilisations are Islam, Buddhism, and what some who hold this view call

"Christendom" or simply "Western civilisation." Nations such as Germany, France, and the United States, in this conceptualisation, stand as subsets of Christendom/Western civilisation; similarly, Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, and other nations are subsets of Islamic civilisation.

From this vantage point, it is a serious error to suggest that Egypt or Iran should be thrust into a Western frame of reference. In this view of the world, they are intrinsically part of Islamic, not Western, civilisation, and it is an act of imperialism to think of them in any other way. Even before the idea of a "clash of civilisations" gained popularity, religious activists around the world asserted that their views about religious politics reflected basic differences in worldviews. They were anticipating the thesis that the Harvard political scientist, Samuel Huntington, propounded in the mid 1990s.[10]

One notable pre-Huntington adherent of the "clash of civilisations" thesis was the Ayatollah Khomeini, who lamented what in prerevolutionary Iran he and others referred to as "West-toxification" or "Westomania." According to Khomeini, Islamic peoples have been stricken with Westomania since the eighth century, and partly for that reason they easily accepted the cultural and political postures of the shah. More recent attempts to capitalise on Westomania, he maintained, have come from the insidious efforts of Western imperialists.[11] The goal of the Islamic revolution in Iran, then, was not only to free Iranians politically from the shah but also to liberate them conceptually from Western ways of thinking.

When the leaders of some formerly colonised countries continue to espouse Western ideas—including especially the idea of secular nationalism—they are accused by other indigenous leaders of perpetuating colonialism. In some Middle Eastern Islamic countries, the injury of the colonial experience was compounded by the insult of having lost their connection with a great Islamic power, the Ottoman Empire. At the end of World War I, the old empire came under the jurisdiction of Britain and other European powers who carved the region into secular nation-states. Countries such as Iraq and Jordan were lines drawn in the sand. Hence, secular nationalism was for them literally the legacy of colonial rule.

Islamic revolutionaries in Iran have also regarded the secular government under the shah as a form of Western colonialism, even though Iran was never a colony in the same sense that many Middle Eastern and South Asian countries were. The heavy-handed role of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in Iranian politics and the force-feeding of Western ideas by the shah were regarded as forms of colonialism all the same. According to one Iranian leader, Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, the religious character of Western nationalism made it a competitor with Islam. He claimed that Western nationalism suffered from a pretension of universality so grand it had religious proportions, and this claim to universality made its cultural and economic colonialism possible by allowing a "national entity" from the West to assume that it had "prior rights to the rest of the world."[12]

These leaders regard as especially pernicious the fact that the cultural colonialism of Western ideas erodes confidence in traditional values. For that matter, it also

undermines traditional religious constructs of society and the state. Concerns over both these matters and over the erosion of religion's influence in public life unite religious activists from Egypt to Sri Lanka, even those who are bitterly opposed to one another. A leader of the religious right in Israel and a spokesperson for the Islamic movement in Palestine, for instance, used exactly the same words to describe their sentiments: "Secular government is the enemy."[13]

Hence, the loss of faith in secular nationalism is part of a profound disappointment: the perception that secular institutions have failed to perform. Not only in the former colonised parts of the world but in the developed West as well, many experienced a disillusionment with the Enlightenment's faith in secularism. It appeared that the secular state had not lived up to its own promises of political freedom, economic prosperity, and social justice.

Some of the most poignant cases of disenchantment with secularism were found among educated members of the middle class who were raised with the high expectations propagated by secular-nationalist political leaders. Some of them were propelled toward religious nationalism after trying to live as secular nationalists and feeling betrayed, or at least unfulfilled. Many of them also felt that Western societies betrayed themselves: the government scandals, persistent social inequities, and devastating economic difficulties of the United States and the former Soviet Union made both democracy and socialism less appealing as role models than they had been in those more innocent decades of the 1940s and 1950s. The global mass media, in their exaggerated way, brought the message that there was a deep malaise in the United States caused by the social failures of unwed mothers, divorce, racism, and drug addiction; the political failures of various political scandalsj and the economic failures associated with trade imbalances and the mounting deficit.

Among some followers, the hopes for religious politics have been utopian. Christian revolutionaries in Latin America have spoken of instituting the "kingdom of God" promised in the New Testament. The "dhammic society" that bhikkhus in Sri Lanka desired as the alternative to secular nationalism resembled a paradise. In a Halakhic society, Jewish leaders in Jerusalem promised, Israel would become more harmonious than it is, all its aspects integrated under religious law. "Man can't live by bread alone," one of the leaders reminded his supporters; "religion is more than just belief and ritual, it is all of life."[14] The vision of religious activists has been appealing in part because it promises a future that cannot easily fail: its moral and spiritual goals are transcendent and not as easy to gauge as are the more materialistic promises of secular nationalists.

In many parts of the world, the profound disappointment in secular nationalism has led to a loss of faith in its relevance and its vision for the future. In their own way, these critics of secular nationalism have experienced what Jürgen Habermas has dubbed a modern "crisis of legitimation," in which the public's respect for political and social institutions has been deflated.[15] The critique of secular nationalism fell on receptive ears in part because people no longer saw secular nationalism as an expression of their own identities or related to their social and economic situations. More importantly, they failed to see how secular nationalism could provide a vision of what they would like

themselves and their communities to become. Secular nationalism came to be seen as alien, the expression of only a small, educated, and privileged few. As both capitalist and formerly socialist governments wrestled with their own constituencies over the moral purpose of their nations and the directions they might take, their old, tired forms of nationalism seemed less appealing elsewhere.

The Synthesis Between Religion and Autocratic Nationalism

Secular nationalism as an all-embracing ideology does not easily accommodate a similarly expansive view of religion, one that reaches out beyond mosques, temples, and churches to embrace all of life. It would seem, then, that the two are incompatible. Yet religion can sometimes be hospitable to the idea of the nation-state—though on religion's terms. Religious activists are well aware that in the past, when a nation was based on the premise of secular nationalism, religion was made marginal to the political order. This outcome was especially unfortunate from many radical religious perspectives—including Jihadi militants, messianic Jewish Zionists, and Christian militia—because they regard the two ideologies as unequal: the religious one is far superior.

Rather than starting with secular nationalism, then, they prefer to begin with religion. In India, Hindu nationalists have been emphatic that Hindutva, as they call Hindu national culture, is the defining characteristic of Indian nationalism. Some Christian militants in the United States want to return to the country's Christian roots, perhaps unaware that the founders were not Christian but Deists. Nonetheless, some of these Christian nationalists insist on the authority of the Bible rather than the constitution. Others anoint the constitution with a religious aura, Christianising it. Messianic Zionists in Israel prefer "Toracracy" rather than democracy. Similar sentiments are echoed in movements of religious nationalism elsewhere in the world.

The implication of this way of speaking is not that religion is antithetical to nationalism, but that religious rather than secular ideologies are the appropriate premises on which to build nations—even the modern nation-state. In fact, virtually every reference to nationhood used by religious activists assumes that the modern nation-state is the only way in which a nation can be construed. The term religious nationalism, therefore, means the attempt to link religion and the nation-state. This is a new development in the history of nationalism, and it immediately raises the question of whether it is possible: whether what we in the West think of as a modern nation—a unified, democratically controlled system of economic and political administration—can in fact be accommodated within a totalising religious worldview.

It is an interesting question and one to which many Western observers would automatically answer no. Even as acute an interpreter of modern society as Giddens regards most religious cultures as, at best, a syncretism of "tribal cultures, on the one hand, and modern societies, on the other."[16] Yet by Giddens's own definition of a modern nation-state, postrevolutionary Iran would qualify. The Islamic revolution in Iran solidified not just central power but also systemic control, a dominance over the population that in some ways was more conducive to nationhood than the monarchical political order of the shah. Ironically, it was Khomeini—with his integrative religious

ideology and his grass-roots network of mullahs—who brought Iran closer to the goal of a unified nation. But it did so in an autocratic way, buttressed by religion.

Does religion lose some essential aspects in accommodating modern politics? Some religious leaders think that it does. In favoring the nation-state over a particular religious congregation as its major community of reference, religion loses the exclusivity held by smaller, subnational religious communities, and the leaders of those communities lose some of their autonomy. For that reason, many religious leaders are suspicious of religious nationalism; some regard it as a theological heresy. Among them are religious Utopians who would rather build their own isolated political societies than deal with the problems of a whole nation, religious liberals who are satisfied with the secular nation-state the way it is, and traditional religious conservatives who would rather ignore politics altogether. Often, though, in religious-supported autocracies, these contrary religious voices are marginalised or silenced. Some of the new religious activists have thought of leading a religious empire with transnational dimensions, but they have lacked the political and military power to do so on their own. The Aum Shinrikyo movement in Japan, for example, imagined a global apocalypse in which their own movement's leaders would survive to become the rulers of a unified post-war world. The radical jihadi movement associated with Osama bin Laden also had a transnational agenda. For all its carefully orchestrated violence against what it regarded as evil powers—including the spectacular destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the subsequent attacks on the transportation systems of London and Madrid, and the many bombings in Iraq—no clear plans for alternative governments or politics emerged.

What has been successful for religious nationalists is their merger of support with politically ambitious autocrats. The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Taliban in Afghanistan are prime examples, as was the erstwhile Islamic State of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. In other autocracies, from Russia where the Russian Orthodox Church supports Putin to Saudi Arabia where the Saud family relies on its Wahhabi Muslim alliance, the role of religion is more in the background in a supporting role.

Modern movements of religious nationalism are subjects of controversy within both religious and secular circles. The marriage between those old competing ideologies of order—religion and secular nationalism—has produced an autocratic offspring of contemporary religious politics. This is an interesting turn in modern history, and one fraught with dangers, for the radical accommodation of religion to authoritarian nationalism may not be good for either religion or political order. The rebellious religious movements that emerged in many parts of the world in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have exhibited both the dangers and the possibilities inherent in religious activists' appropriation of the instruments of political power.

There are forms of autocracies that are not based on religion, such as in China. But even in that country, there is an ascription to Sino culture based on Han ethnicity that has virtually a sacral character and that buttresses the autocratic state. The forced re-education of Muslim Uighur people in Xinjiang province is an example. They are being trained to be more like Han Chinese.

Perhaps if we used the term "cultural nationalism" rather than "religious nationalism," the phrase would be broad enough to encompass what seems to be a requisite cultural element to the rise of autocratic dictatorships. Non-autocratic societies may also have proud cultural elements, though the difference is the degree to which governmental control rests upon and is infused with the cultural base. Democratic societies are proudly neutral on culture. They do not privilege one over the other, and their mantra is inclusion, the notion that regardless of one's cultural sensibilities, all are equal under the law. In Myanmar, for instance, the democratic government that came into being when the country then called Burma achieved its independence included Muslims and tribal Christians in its cabinet. Today the military regime is in league with the Buddhist monks who insist that Myanmar's sovereignty is exclusively based on Burmese Buddhism.

At present the various forms of cultural nationalism and autocracies around the world are not united, though they often lean on each other for support when confronted with their enemy, secular democracy. The more that secular democratic societies can band together in the face of this new Cold War, the greater are their chances for their survival, and for the democratic future of this planet.

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Navigating the "Foreign" in 21st Century Foreign Policy: The Role of Area Studies in Understanding the Future of US-China Relations

Kevin Rudd

Abstract: *An Address on the 20th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Department of Area Studies at the University of Oxford. My mission tonight is a simple one: First, how best to define the role of "area studies" and its growing importance in understanding the internal complexity of individual nation states in 21st century international diplomacy. Second, what role must this discipline play in the unfolding contours of US-China relations, the single-most important geo-political and geo-economic relationship in the world, in what I have long-called the present "decade of living dangerously."*

Until the beginning of last decade, it had become a truism in the academic study of international relations, international political economy and foreign policy that during the age of globalisation, we had seen the gradual collapse of what was once seen as the "great divide" – between the foreign and the domestic, the national and the international, the internal and the external. In part, this was because of the growing significance of international trade, investment, capital, technology and people flows as a proportion of overall national and international economic activity. It was also because we saw a real-world convergence between these two sets of previously distinct policy domains – as national policy decisions could no longer be neatly quarantined from their international consequences. Moreover, decision-makers themselves could no longer be kept in neat, hermetically sealed foreign and domestic policy boxes, as each recognised that the impacts of their decisions increasingly flowed in multiple directions – both at home and abroad.

Most of all, the collapse of this great historical divide between the internal and the external was due to the ideational nature of the globalisation project itself, which became an increasingly common (if often unspoken) policy project across much of the international community – premised in large part on neo-liberal assumptions that were increasingly anchored in the foundational ideas of open markets, societies, and polities. As we all marched happily towards the "end of history," and became conscripted as "global citizens," the age of peak globalisation suggested that even the notion of the nation state itself had become just a little passé. Remember that thing called Europe?

The Return of the State

Times have changed. We now see the revenge of geography and the return of the state. We see states (including large states) once again invading other states; the return of xenophobia as foreigners are told they are no longer welcome; the resurgence of protectionism as free trade is deemed to have failed; the rebirth of industrial policy as markets too are deemed to have failed. Most importantly, the intellectual assumptions of the entire globalisation project are now under political assault from both the left and the right, and from states as diverse as the United States of America and the People's Republic of China.

While we may have experienced peak globalisation across the collective West, in Moscow and Beijing, we have instead seen states which are themselves seldom in retreat from the market. Under one form of state capitalism or the other, the authoritarian state, by and large, went from strength to strength. And in China's case, lest there remain any doubt about this, Xi Jinping over the last decade has underscored afresh the absolute centrality of that nation's party state – whatever the dictates and demands of the market might be.

Tipping Points

It is hard to pinpoint when various inflection points in the phenomenon of de-globalisation we now confront began to emerge. Some point to the invasion of Iraq, and others to Russia's brutal invasion and occupation of Ukraine, or the massive market failures of the Global Financial Crisis. Here in the United Kingdom, Brexit in many respects was the symptom of this de-globalisation phenomenon rather than its cause, although we should never discount the power of political leadership to accelerate the underlying forces of societal and economic change, or if it so chose, to reshape it. Meanwhile, in the United States, the election and now re-election of the Trump Administration represents the most explicit disavowal of the underlying economic logic of the globalisation project we have seen in the Western World.

Underlying these critical turning points have been a vast array of forces. These include the slow economic and sociological burn of rising income inequality between the very rich, the poor and the rest. This has been accompanied by the hollowing out of traditional manufacturing across the cities and towns of the collective West through a combination of outsourcing and technological disruption at home. All of this is unfolding at the inception of seismic changes in labour markets that are starting to unfold across the world arising from the artificial intelligence revolution. The brutal forces of challenge and change will move from the blue-collar workforce to white collar employees. It is the latter who have become the targets of this increasingly relentless Fourth Industrial Revolution. Meanwhile, turbocharging this vast array of political, social and economic forces has been the unprecedented international movement of people across national borders – as innocent civilians seek to escape violence, flee poverty, or simply seek a better life. For all these reasons, we see the return of the state as citizens now turn to their governments to protect them from these convulsions that either in reality, or only per their perception, impact their daily lives.

Impact on Foreign Policy

The reason for this short peroration on the overall state of the globalisation project (and now what we might call the de-globalisation project) is that it defines the overall context in which we are operating. Foreign policy does not occur in a vacuum, nor do US-China relations. As these are the explicit subjects of this lecture, it's important to be mindful from the outset of the changing global environment in which these traditional fields are now located. The uncomfortable truth is that policy decision-makers are now operating across a complex, shifting and increasingly uncomfortable terrain where many find that several of the assumptions of the last 35 years no longer apply. This makes the hard business of strategy and diplomacy even harder than before, given that policymakers generally crave stability, certainty and predictability, above all in times of pronounced change.

So, for the democracies at least, and to quote that great enemy of democracy, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, "what then is to be done?" I believe it is useful for policymakers to focus on three core challenges. First, to safeguard the values that continue to animate us as democracies. Freedom, for example, is one such animating value. So too is political freedom, as expressed through the various forms of the democratic process, as are the wider set of values articulated carefully in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These are no small things. Each has been hard-fought over the centuries. There are many who still seek to extinguish them. But if we begin to compromise on these values, we become lesser people because we cease to be true to ourselves.

Second, we need to be clear-sighted in defining our core national interests – interests which are shaped in large part by the values for which we stand. We must be clear about the principles of territorial integrity, political sovereignty, building prosperity, and sharing its fruits. We need to be clear about planetary sustainability, the international rules-based order, and the norms, institutions and processes that have been created to give them effect. We must be clear too in our commitment to defending these institutions when they are under attack, while continuing to reform them to make them more effective, because if we allow the order to falter, fail or fall, it will be difficult to rebuild. History teaches us that international orders are hard to create, and easy to dismember – rarely dramatically – but usually through death by a thousand cuts.

Third, as we shape national strategies to realize these values and interests, we must be equally clear-eyed about the worldview of those around us, rather than assuming they see reality as we do. This applies in relation to our strategic partners, regardless of how familiar they may have been to us in the past. Most importantly, it applies to our strategic competitors as well as our potential adversaries. This is where the discipline of area studies has a new and vital role to play in foreign policy in navigating the complexity of the changing international terrain in which policy decision-makers must now operate.

Utility of Theoretical Frameworks: The Role of Foreign Policy Analysis

I am relatively familiar with the dividing lines between the various claims to theoretical hegemony across the various disciplines of international relations theory: the realist

school and its various sub-schools – of states maximising power at the expense of other states, the balance or imbalance of power between them, and the balancing and 'bandwagoning' impact this has on the behaviour of others; the liberal internationalist school from which the globalisation project comes; the structuralist school of Marxist theoreticians (including Chinese Marxists) and the central organising principles of classes rather than states in shaping domestic and international political behaviour; and the constructivist school of international relations, including the English School – and its more nuanced rendering of realism through what my compatriot Hedley Bull described as the concept of "international society".

As a foreign policy practitioner myself, as a previous Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and professional diplomat, I particularly understand the sub-field of Foreign Policy Analysis (or FPA) as perhaps the most realistic description of the factors that decision makers must weigh in reaching a given decision. Within this framework, one of the most critical domains for foreign policy decision-makers is understanding how the other party thinks, why they think that way, and based on that, how to carve a pathway forward; be it on tariffs, or Taiwan. That is where the field of "area studies" enters the fray, often seen as a poor cousin to the grand theories of the discipline. In my view, this should no longer be the case. In short, the essential organising principle of area studies is to interpret, to understand and therefore to navigate "the other" in the cold hard praxis of foreign policy reality – or as the title of my lecture naively puts it, to put the "foreign" back into "foreign policy."

Area studies serve first to understand how basic factors such as different constraints and opportunities presented by geography, geology and the allocation of natural resources shape different national perceptions of scarcity and vulnerability; second, how differences in history and historiography shape different popular and elite perceptions of a given international reality; third, how language, literature and culture can sharpen rather than blunt pre-existing assumptions about the "other" in international relations; fourth, how different political philosophies, ideologies and systems can produce radically different conclusions about how to deal with what we may perceive to be a common challenge facing us all; fifth, the domestic drivers of decisions within different polities, rather than breezily assuming that the thing we call "the state" in international relations should be taken for granted, that we need not or cannot interrogate it further, or that it is some sort of dark, mysterious 'black box' driven by its own deep logic, rather than the usual types of institutional untidyness made up of conflicting domestic personalities, ambitions and agendas. Finally, underpinning the above, area studies serve radically different assumptions in the eternal debate between "structure" and "agency" in international relations theory and practice.

As a foreign policy practitioner, I have long thought that there is something inherently counter-factual in the dismal fatalism of John Meirsheimer's version of realism in which structure routinely triumphs over agency. For different reasons, I have also found impractical the cheery optimism of liberal internationalist theorists who believe, a priori, that the inherent "structure" of political and economic liberalism, reinforced by a framework of international institutions, will inevitably deliver a more inter-dependent and less bellicose world. As for the structuralists themselves, the idea that various forms

of historical determinism are driving the world inexorably towards some sort of long-term Marxist paradise is the least persuasive theoretical paradigm of all, although we must be mindful of the fact that it does represent the official ideological orthodoxy of the Chinese Communist Party and therefore the People's Republic of China.

Constructivists at least subscribe to the proposition that it lies within our individual agency as representatives of states to "construct" various forms of global and regional order. Whereas Foreign Policy Analysis, either in its realist or constructivist variants, provides us with a more balanced perspective on the impact of structure and agency on a given foreign policy reality. It recognises, for example, that foreign policy decision-makers are deeply influenced by the complex "structure" of the global forces at work in shaping the emerging international system. At the same time, Foreign Policy Analysis recognises the "agency" of foreign policy decision-makers in capitals as they seek to balance a range of domestic and international factors in charting the way forward.

Once again, this is where "area studies" becomes the natural academic bedfellow of foreign policy analysis, in the critical role it can play in drawing together the disparate insights of political science, economics, history (including diplomatic history), religious studies, comparative cultures as well as through the plain, old fashioned but intellectually taxing study of foreign languages. For these are the academic tools though which we can help define the granular reality of "otherness" in international relations, in support of the practical work of foreign policy decision-makers, rather than blithely assuming the rest of the world somehow thinks and perceives reality as we do. The singular contribution of area studies, as the title of this lecture suggests, is to bring back the "foreign" into the disciplined practice of "foreign policy." It does so not just by analysing the complex external terrain which the foreign policy decision-maker must confront, but also by synthesising the advice that is provided, so that the decision-maker can make sense of how a particular decision is likely to be received. In other words, will the policy decision in question achieve its policy objective? Will it have the reverse effect? Or is it all just a wild shot into the dark where the un-stated objective of a given decision is often to satisfy the needs of domestic political signalling within the decision-making state, as opposed to materially changing the real-world foreign or security policy behaviour of the state that is supposedly the object of that decision.

The Application of Theoretical Frameworks to US-China Relations

How does all this play out in relation to US-China relations under Xi Jinping? How do we best understand China's "otherness?" How do we best define China's "foreignness." Is there, for example, a useful theoretical framework for understanding the Chinese Communist Party's evolving ideological worldview and its impact on China's domestic and foreign policy direction under Xi Jinping? And where do we locate Xi's worldview within a framework that provides insight into the ideological and policy changes that have unfolded over the last decade across Chinese politics, economics, and foreign policy. What I propose to do in the remainder of this lecture is to try to apply the major schools and sub-schools of international relations theory listed above to the unfolding reality of contemporary US-China relations. In so doing, I hope to offer some tentative

conclusions on which of these theoretical paradigms might offer the most productive and predictive insights into the future.

Realism

Let us start once again with realism. Western "realist", "neo-realist" or so-called "structural realist" frameworks for interpreting China's worldview, and the strategic policy settings that flow from it, are in plentiful supply. This applies to both the "offensive" and "defensive" variations of realist theory. The principal standard-bearer for the offensive-realist view of China's international strategy is John Mearsheimer. This is stated most starkly in the 2014 edition of Mearsheimer's book, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics.[1] This book dedicates its concluding chapter to proving that China, irrespective of the public ideation advanced by its leaders on the question of China's emerging capabilities and intentions, provides just one further example of what every great power seeks to do: "to maximise its share of world power and eventually dominate the system."[2]

Mearsheimer argues further that despite American claims to some form of moral exceptionalism, offensive realism is precisely the script that the United States itself followed in its own international policy during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It did so by first becoming the uncontested regional great power in the Americas, before then becoming the uncontested global superpower in the post-war era. Mearsheimer sees no reason why China's regional and global behaviour will be any different:

> *"China will want to make sure that it is so powerful that no state in Asia will have the wherewithal to threaten it...Of course, it is always possible that Chinese leaders will conclude that it is imperative to attack another country to achieve regional hegemony. It is more likely, however, that China will seek to grow its economy and become so powerful it will dictate the acceptable boundaries for behaviour for neighbouring countries and will make it clear they will pay a substantial price if they do not follow the rules."[3]*

Per Mearsheimer's argument, China will seek to push the United States out of the Asia Pacific region by developing its own variation of the Monroe Doctrine under which the US expelled European powers from the Western Hemisphere. China will also want its great power neighbours in Asia (Japan, India, and Russia) to become weaker and more isolated from sources of international support beyond the region, namely the US.

Liberal Internationalism

The principal alternative theoretical discourse for explaining China's evolving international engagement is liberalism, neo-liberalism, or liberal institutionalism. Liberal international relations theorists such as Robert Keohane share several underlying "positivist" assumptions with realists, including the existence of a state of "international anarchy" and the "rational egoism of states" in which states act as rational actors in the maximization of their national self-interests.[4] Where liberalism differs from realism is its underlying Kantian proposition that these interests are best secured not through "self-help", power maximization, the balance of power and, where necessary, war. But rather through rational decisions in support of peaceful cooperation, the development of an

international "liberal" rules-based system, ultimately anchored in liberal democratic politics, open markets and international institutions that give systematic effect to these values.[5]

John Ikenberry, a prominent exponent of liberal internationalist theory, has argued that there is a logic of "enmeshment and entrapment" into the liberal order that also applies to rising China. According to Ikenberry, "...once such an order is in place, a rising state seeking to replace the existing order faces a daunting task...[because] even if such a China-led international order could be imagined, the sunk costs and system effects that are generated by the existing order create higher barriers to change."[6] Ikenberry adds that as the liberal international order "gains in global scope, it becomes more powerful and wealthy relative to the alternatives" and that this places rising states seeking to create an alternative at an increasing disadvantage.[7] More broadly, Ikenberry also controversially contends that beyond the accumulated "functionality" of the existing order for all members of that order, including China, the future of the liberal international system is not necessarily contingent on continuing American hegemony. Writing nearly a decade later, however, and already several years into Xi Jinping's presidency, Ikenberry in 2015 advanced a more cautious analysis in which he concedes the likelihood of a greater "struggle" for the terms of the new global order between China and the US.[8] Ikenberry's overall conclusions concerning a China-dominated liberal international order of the future nonetheless remained optimistic: "...the United States and China will no doubt struggle and compete over the rules and the institutions of the international order, but this struggle will not be full-scale ideological battle for two divergent visions of twenty-first-century world order."[9]

Structuralism

The third "positivist" school of international relations theory, beyond realism and liberalism, is Marxism or "structuralism." Whereas Marxist propositions animated Chinese official thinking about China's place in the world under Mao's "Three Worlds Theory," Mao's doctrine of permanent revolution and the Maoist practice of international solidarity, these principles had been quietly entombed under Deng, Jiang, and Hu after Mao had passed from the scene. The reason was clear: under Deng, Chinese Marxism, or "socialism with Chinese characteristics", was now to embrace a socialist "market" economy where despite continued state ownership of land and the continued presence of state-owned enterprises, the "market" was now intended to play the principal role in the allocation of resources. Permanent class struggle (the engine room of dialectical materialism) as a means of securing permanent revolution, either at home or abroad, had been officially abandoned; as had Chinese support, political or material, for international Marxist movements.

This nonetheless presented a marked contradiction between classical Marxist concepts on the exploitative and hegemonic nature of global capitalism on the one hand, and China's new and active participation in this self-same neo-liberal globalization project on the other. Enter Xi Jinping, whose repeated calls for a return to greater Marxist orthodoxy in China's domestic ideological debate has probed the question of where Xi might now take all this in any future revision of his international worldview. Indeed, if this ideological revision has happened on the homefront, it also invites a parallel Marxist

critique of the liberal-international abroad, given that Marxism-Leninism is a totalising theoretical framework which seeks to cover the field. Marxist-Leninist perspectives, both as a dialectical methodology, a corpus of ideological conclusions about the ideal end-state of the world and how best to get there, can no longer be ignored as simple political nostalgia in any analysis of Xi's evolving domestic and international worldview. Furthermore, this emerging Marxist critique of critical aspects of China's pre-existing domestic and international model has taken the country further away from Ikenberry's theorized neo-liberal convergence.

Constructivism

Since the end of the Cold War, constructivism as a theory of international relations has increasingly challenged the duopoly of realism and liberalism as the principal explanatory devices for explaining changing international realities. The collective failure of mainstream, "positivist-rationalist" international relations theory to predict the collapse of the Soviet Union and the peaceful end of the Cold War fuelled this change. This opened the door to other approaches, including Alexander Wendt in his Social Theory of International Relations in 1992. Wendt challenged the ontological and epistemological assumptions of previous IR theory by invoking a new post-positivist approach to IR drawn from other branches of social theory, most particularly constructivism.[10] Constructivism in international relations theory argues that the idea that international reality was exclusively a material phenomenon was incomplete and that IR was at least equally a social, cultural and ideational phenomenon driven from within states.

The English School

Constructivist contributions to international relations theory have influenced the recent evolution of the "English School" and its advocacy of the concept of "international society." It argues that there are values, norms and rules that form the fabric of an international society which can militate against the worst forms of unilateral action by states, while still falling short of a perfect, liberal rules-based order. The English School also argued that the realism of the "balance of power," and even "limited war," remained as "institutions" in the underlying international order. But these factors did not preclude the evolution of a society of states which, while falling short of the dreams of liberal institutionalists, could nonetheless act to prevent global conflagration.

Andrew Hurrell, influenced by both constructivist IRT and the English School in particular, defines the "threefold nature of the challenge facing international society" as: the need to manage unequal power in international relations, the need to "capture shared and common interests," and the need "to mediate cultural and value conflict."[11] This is a useful typology for describing the challenges we face with China's changing worldview and its changing patterns of regional and global engagement. In answering these three challenges, Hurrell acknowledges the different traditions alive in the English School itself on the relative "thinness" and "thickness" of the rules, norms and values of the international society to be constructed.

This could either take the form of a limited, minimalist society of "pluralist" sovereign states which accepted "a pessimistic view of the constraints of power politics, as well as a deep scepticism regarding the depth of value consensus that is ever likely to exist across the states and societies of the world."[12] Alternatively, it could take the form of a more maximalist "liberal solidarist" society of states, "capable of fulfilling a broader range of political and moral purposes…that strives to narrow the gap between law and politics, and between law and morality."[13] In understanding the complexity of these possibilities, both over time and in different geographies, Hurrell also emphasises that "history matters," "not as an argument about eternal recurrence and endless reproduction," but instead as the means for the "uncovering of actors' understandings of international politics and the ways in which these understandings have been gathered into intelligible patterns, traditions or ideologies."[14]

Based on this view of history, Hurrell also argues that both "material" and "social" structures matter in international relations, and that "international social structures are seen not as 'natural' features in world politics, but as produced and re-produced in the concrete social practices of social actors in inter-subjective meanings…embedded in historical practice and in historically constructed normative structures."[15] Furthermore, consistent with the constructivist tradition's particular view of the role of human agency in shaping these social constructions on international relations, Hurrell underlines the powerful "role of ideas in understanding and explaining political action."

Although Hurrell's seminal 2007 account of constructivism and the English School does not seek specifically to apply his approach to either China or Asia, it provides a useful theoretical framework that lends itself to the emerging realities of Xi Jinping's ideological challenge to the current order. Evelyn Goh, however, has explicitly argued the applicability of the principles of the English School, and its evolving constructivist concept of "international society," in seeking to understand China's rise within East Asia. Goh argues that "in East Asia, debates about power and order congregate around two looming trends: the changing character of America's preponderance, and the rise of China, and that these twin concerns give rise to three alternative narratives about the future of the global order and the role of Asia as within it."[16] Goh specifically rejects the simple binary of US decline and China's rise as providing an effective understanding of the long-term processes involved in the evolution of any new post-cold-war order in East Asia. Indeed, she argues that we have witnessed a "parallel resurgence" of both American and Chinese power across the region in the decades following 1991, with the former remaining predominant.[17]

This, she contends, has not resulted in any classical "power transition," but instead has produced a more complex process of interaction between the US, China and regional states as part of "order transition."[18] Rather than exclusively relying on the exercise of raw power, Goh argues that regional hegemons, such as the US and China, are instead seeking to negotiate varying forms of "social compacts" with non-hegemonic states within their region – compacts which over time elaborate the values, norms, rules and associated mutual expectations of the emerging regional order. This is not a neat linear process as classical "power transition theory" would normally imply. Instead, it is iterative, also involving differing "ideations" on the part of hegemonic powers as to what the order might look like for its various participants and on various issues.

Goh's adaptation of the historical insights of the English School, drawn from the European experience, and applied to the emerging questions of order in East Asia, is innovative and insightful. It helps us understand both the processes in which China's changing worldview is being applied to its immediate region and the American and wider regional response to it. Earlier English School conclusions on the continued cogency of realist concepts of hegemony, "power balancing" and "order" remain active in her analysis. However, Goh also adds to these a specific understanding of "international society" in East Asia – a reflection of what she calls the "fundamentally social nature of the international system." Goh draws explicitly on Hedley Bull's insights on the role of norms, rules and expectations that "constitute, regulate and make predictable international life."[19] She argues that in East Asia, this necessarily involves "ideational and normative" engagement in the construction of the fabric of the order, rather than the simple application of realist brute force by one hegemon or another. I argue this concept of "ideational engagement" also provides theoretical space for the role of ideology – and in China's case the domestic and international expression of China's emerging Marxist-Nationalist worldview.

Foreign Policy Analysis

Finally, Foreign Policy Analysis or FPA, offers a supplementary theoretical framework within the constructivist paradigm for analysing China's changing international engagement under Xi Jinping. FPA agrees with realism that the state is regarded as the "general actor" in international relations. But to understand what is actually happening in foreign policy behaviour, it is critical to look beyond the "black box" of the state and instead look "within" the state to identify the individual human beings that make foreign policy decisions, in addition to the full range of factors that impact the decision-making process.[20] FPA is also an assertion of the primacy of the individual "agent" over the "structure" of the foreign policy process. FPA is concerned too with "multi-dimensional" influences on the foreign policy process. These include the intersection of material and ideational factors, including the role of "ideas" as a determining factor in the choice of specific courses of action. They also include the impact of historical memory, cultural identity, political ideology and domestic political factors on foreign policy decisions. Importantly, they also recognise the "two-level game" of intersecting foreign and domestic political considerations; internal bureaucratic, advisory and interest group competition in decision-making processes; and, most critically leadership types including the psychological profile of individual decision-makers.[21]

In a highly centralised, one-party state such as China, the role of individual leaders within the political system is paramount. Zhang Qingmin, for example, having analysed the impact of both Mao's and Deng's different leadership types on the content of Chinese foreign policy decision-making over several decades, has argued that for IR theory to offer a useful understanding of China's international policy and worldview requires an "integrated approach that brings leadership personality back into the centre of the analysis."[22] Zhang argues that structural realism provides an explanation for some Chinese decisions on strategic balancing between the Soviet Union and the US during the first half-century of the history of the People's Republic. But it does not offer sufficient explanatory power for understanding other decisions: for example, the Sino-

Soviet split, Beijing's equidistance between Moscow and Washington during the 1960s, nor Beijing's failure to rebalance away from the US in the immediate period following the end of the Cold War. Zhang argues that an alternative explanation is necessary to explain these decisions. Given the hierarchical nature of Chinese politics, and the strength of the political personalities of Mao, Deng and Xi, Zhang argues that this can only be achieved by "bridging Western theories of foreign policy analysis with Chinese area studies."[23]

I agree with Zhang's conclusions on this. David Houghton has addressed the wider question of where to locate FPA within the broader inter-paradigm debates of mainstream IR theory, noting that 'for many years, the study of foreign policy analysis has been a type of free-floating enterprise, logically unconnected to, and disconnected from, the main theories of international relations.[24] Houghton nonetheless identifies specific areas of common ground between constructivism and foreign policy analysis, including the centrality of human agency in constructing social reality, the impact of "ideation" on individual acts of social behaviour, and the importance of "identity" in shaping political decisions.[25] Once again, I agree with Houghton's analysis in seeing FPA as a natural expression of one form of constructivist reality.

Conclusion

To conclude, I argue that FPA therefore offers a constructivist account of Xi Jinping's worldview, while also recognising the continuing significance of realist understandings of the balance of power. I do so for the following reasons. First, any account of Xi's worldview must accommodate the central role of ideology within the Chinese political system as a means of communicating the policy intent of the leadership to the party and country. Second, Xi's ideological worldview is ultimately indivisible between the foreign and the domestic. Whereas Deng may have sought to accept an international political reality that was significantly at variance from his domestic political-economic circumstances, Xi has indicated that he is no longer willing to do so. Moreover, beyond ideology, there are also other domestic political and economic factors impacting China's decision-making processes which require us to look well beyond the "black box" of the Chinese state. FPA helps give theoretical shape to these critical domestic drivers of Chinese international relations behaviour. Third, unlike a classical constructivist approach which rejects a critical role for realist notions of the balance of power, Foreign Policy Analysis has no such difficulty. Indeed, in China's case, I argue that the CCP's assessments of "comprehensive national power" relative to the US continue to exert a decisive influence on the international policy decisions of the leadership. And no analytical paradigm can reasonably exclude it. Fourth, the advantage of the constructivist tradition of the English School of international relations is that it seeks to bring all these various elements together within a single framework. Fifth, and most importantly for our purposes here this evening, is that an essential ingredient to this overall constructivist approach to understanding, predicting and therefore navigating the unfolding trajectory of US-China relations remains the discipline of "area studies".

Determinist views of international relations (be they realist, liberal institutionalist or structuralist) by and large render "area studies" obsolete. That is because the particularities of national conditions are usually relegated to the margins by these

hegemonic theories of international relations. These grand theoretical frameworks describe a vast array of irresistible forces at work in deeply shaping the structure of the international order, irrespective of the efforts that individual states or their leaders may make in exercising their political agency as effective actors in the international system. By contrast, I argue that the most instructive framework for understanding the future of US-China relations is:

1. First, a constructivist approach as rendered through the English School of international relations theory,

2. Second, an approach that is defined through the disciplines of Foreign Policy Analysis, and

3. Third, one that is refined further through the rigorous pursuit of "area studies" into what lies beneath and behind the "black box" of the Chinese party state.

This approach also allows scholars, within this overall framework, to apply insights from other theoretical contributions including Authoritarian Resilience Theory, Power Transition Theory and its first cousin Order Transition Theory. Most importantly, this broad conceptual approach to understanding and navigating US-China relations recognises the agency of individual political actors. That, for example, is how I went about framing my own contribution to the field by offering a framework of "Managed Strategic Competition" in my book entitled The Avoidable War. That framework is based on a recognition of a changing balance of power, the need to construct an order capable of governing the relationship between these two great powers, and to do so in a manner fully mindful of the domestic priorities and external perceptions of both the United States and the Chinese party state. That approach stands in contrast to the stark visions of either heaven, hell or socialist nirvana - offered respectively by liberal institutionalists, Meirsheimerarian realists or Marxist determinists.

The reality is that we all have agency. And it is true that some have more agency than others. But we are not helpless, feckless, unwitting pawns in the hands of structural forces beyond our control. And that is why I choose to be a realistic optimist in our ability to navigate the complex shoals that lie ahead in US-China relations in this long, long decade – this "decade of living dangerously".

Notes

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US-EU ECONOMIC BINDING WITHIN A STRATEGIC TRIANGLE WITH CHINA

Daniel Thumpston

Abstract: *As China-US rivalry has increased, questions of whether we have entered a second Cold War loom large. In this paper, I contribute to this debate by exploring the role of the EU in US-China economic competition. I find that the concept of a strategic triangle drawn from the first Cold War literature is a useful conceptual tool to explain aspects of economic diplomacy between the US and EU during the first Trump and Biden administrations. Focusing on US-EU-Japan trilateral trade cooperation and the EU-US Trade and Technology Council, I argue that these novel forums are a form of binding, which seek to bring the EU and US closer. This analytical approach captures the critical role of China as a third point in an economic strategic triangle with the US and EU, showing how binding efforts were driven by US-China economic rivalry and shared EU and US concerns about Chinese trade practices and its technological rise. Using thematic analysis of official documents, I show that the US-EU binding occurred through increased alignment on collective stances and actions in areas of trade norms and practices, and collaboration in the development and governance of emerging technologies.*

As US-China rivalry has intensified and geoeconomic competition reshapes the way states approach interactions in the global economy, the question of whether we have entered a new Cold War looms large. This question is often met with strong responses, with Cold War comparisons to the present era labelled as 'although convenient, [...] lazy and potentially dangerous';[1] and at risk of leading to reductionist thinking. However, despite the clear dangers of over-simplified comparisons, similarities continue to show themselves in non-military confrontation, economic and technological rivalry, and geopolitical jostling to develop alliances and build and maintain national power. This suggests that careful comparisons may be useful to better understand contemporary developments. Therefore, this paper situates itself within this wider debate and contributes to this edition by leaning on contributions by Schindler et al[2] that frame US-China competition as a second Cold War in which US hegemony is challenged by a resurgent China; and occurs principally in economic domains. Specifically, this paper asks how US-China competition is taking place in the economic realm through a focus on US economic diplomacy with the EU during the first Trump and Biden administrations.[3]

Within the context of debates about a second Cold War, this paper first aims to explain novel economic arrangements between the US and the EU which are under-theorised

and point to the importance of external influences. I focus on two initiatives during the first Trump and Biden administrations: The Trilateral Meeting of Trade Ministers (TMTM) between the US, Japan, and the EU; and the EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC). These trade and investment cooperation forums were initiated following a period of growing EU-China trade and investment proximity, during which Chinese investment into the EU peaked in 2016[4] and EU wariness of its trade and investment relationship with China was not yet a dominant discourse or policy agenda.[5] The initiatives are unusual in the way they bring together specific configurations of actors (EU-US and EU-US-Japan) around specific trade and investment issues (trade norms and technology) in a format outside of formal trade negotiations or pre-existing trade architectures.[6] The policy focus of these forums shows significant crossover with concerns raised by both the US and the EU over China's economic and technological rise. Existing literature has not offered a theory-driven analysis of the motivations for these initiatives through a geopolitical lens. Yet, as shown in this paper, their study provides insights into US-EU economic diplomacy during a period of US-China economic competition.

To address this gap, I bring in the concept of a strategic triangle, first developed by Lowell Dittmer as a way to understand Cold War dynamics in East Asia.[7] I argue that the strategic triangle concept is valuable for understanding how the TMTM and TTC furthered US and EU trade interests; and that a focus on EU-US economic diplomacy only through a bilateral lens would overlook China as the major influence which motivates these economic forums. Building on this approach, I use the concept of binding, developed from the strategic triangle literature, to explain US and EU actions within a triangular dynamic. This helps to understand why the US used economic diplomacy towards the EU through the TMTM and TTC to bound the EU and US closer on a shared economic agenda to counter China.

The second aim of this paper is to show that the strategic triangle concept can be used to understand rivalry between China and the US through their economic relations with the EU as a significant third party. I use the novel economic arrangements TMTM and TTC as examples to show that the strategic triangle concept is useful to understand US-China rivalry and US-EU-China dynamics in the domain of trade and economic relations. I argue that contrary to much of the existing literature, the EU should be considered a valid actor within a strategic triangle dynamic and that in doing so, we can better understand EU motivations in its economic diplomacy with the US. Furthermore, by importing the concept of the strategic triangle from (first) Cold War literature, this paper contributes to the emerging second Cold War literature, and, through a focus on economic diplomacy, I contribute to literature on geoeconomics as an era defining aspect of US-China rivalry.

This paper uses an interpretive case study approach, which applies a theoretical framework to provide an explanation of empirical phenomena.[8] Analytically, I use thematic analysis of the content of the EU-US economic diplomacy initiatives of TMTM and TTC, to show how they cooperated on issues that were central to both of their economic relations with China as the third party, and how these initiatives were acts of binding for the EU and US. I first discuss the concepts of economic diplomacy and

geoeconomics, showing that these concepts are useful to describe competition as part of the "Second Cold War". Following this, I discuss the concepts of a strategic triangle, identifying criteria and characteristics, and the role of players within a triangle. Third, I offer a thematic analysis of the content of the EU-US economic diplomacy initiatives of TMTM and TTC, to show how they cooperated on issues that were central to both of their economic relations with China, as the third party, and how these initiatives bound the EU and US in a shared approach. Last, I consider alternative and complementary explanations beyond the tactic of binding, looking at EU agency within the triangle and the potential of the concept of hedging. These additional concepts help parse how different motivations shape EU approaches to EU-US economic diplomacy, which bolsters an understanding of the EU as a player in a triangle where US-China rivalry is the dominant factor.

Economic diplomacy within the context of a second Cold War

Much scholarship on the first Cold War rests on neorealist approaches to international relations, prioritising an ontology of structural power relations in which the concept of balance of power has significant explanatory power.[9] Realist understandings of international relations have regained relevance during a new era of rivalry and competition, shaped by the rise of China and its relationship with the US, whereby great power competition is usurping liberalism as perhaps the defining mode of global politics. China's rise, or arguably China's attainment of risen status,[10] has helped to usher in a period of strategic competition with the US, the world's foremost economic, military and diplomatic power. This has caused changes in the balance of power in global politics, with a decline in relative US power and China becoming closer to a peer competitor of the US, leading to concerns over the potential for conflict.[11] The idea of a cold war, characterised by an absence of direct military confrontation and wide-ranging competition, is useful for understanding US-China relations, particularly in the economic sphere; it is this focus on economic competition within the framing of the idea of a second Cold War which shapes this contribution.

Economic competition existed between the US and USSR, but it was not the defining feature of the Cold War, which was mainly a rivalry of ideology and geopolitical influence. Economic superiority was important, and a confirmation of a superior socio-economic model, but it was not the end goal of US and Soviet grand strategy. The current period, however, is defined by economic competition as the key domain and this is what makes US-China competition today different from the first Cold War; it is an era defined by a new geoeconomic order of economic competition.[12] The second Cold War analogy is apt, however, because economic competition sits within a broadly competitive relationship, where rivalry is also seen across diplomatic, military and ideational realms. Furthermore, it is this situating of economic competition within a broadly rivalrous relationship that differentiates itself from other periods or forms of economic competition, such as EU-US economic competition or US-Japanese economic competition in the 1980s.

Economic rivalry is characterised by competition in multiple areas of economic interaction, including technological superiority, supply chains, industrial base, influence in international organisations, standards setting, and infrastructure.

Emerging technologies in particular have acted as multipliers of concerns over economic competitiveness due to their market shaping and disruptive potential and, simultaneously, the military applications of some emerging technologies. Taking economic rivalry as the key mode of competition between the US and China, an important characteristic of this geoeconomic period, however, is that the US and China are economically entwined with each other and the global economy at large, in ways the USSR and US never were. This is an important aspect of US-China competition, with China seeking to expand its economic influence through outbound investment and initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, to challenge the US's dominant role in the global economy through its position as originator and lynchpin of the Bretton Woods system of global economic governance. It is this focus on US-China interactions with third parties as an arena of economic rivalry which shows the importance of economic diplomacy as a conceptual lens to understand US-China economic rivalry.

Given the entwined nature of the global economy, the role of third parties plays a considerable part in this bilateral competition. To understand this, I bring in the concept of economic diplomacy, defined as 'diplomacy focusing on economic outcomes,'[13] to capture this area of competitive action. Economic diplomacy is a form of economic statecraft, understood as the use of economic tools to pursue foreign policy aims,[14] and is part of an economic statecraft toolkit that can be used to achieve larger foreign policy goals. I prefer the term economic diplomacy here as it better captures the diplomatic nature of the TMTM and TTC and places less emphasis on the leveraging of economic hard power to pursue state aims which is an important aspect of economic statecraft. Drawing on this paradigm of geoeconomic competition and economic entwinedness as important characteristics of contemporary US-China competition, I look at the TMTM and TTC as forms of economic diplomacy shaped by a second US-China Cold War.

The concept of a strategic triangle and its application to US-EU-China economic relations

The concept of strategic triangle was first proposed by Lowell Dittmer[15] as a lens for viewing great power competition that accounts for the effects and influence of three separate political actors. It was developed from his study of US-USSR-China relations within the context of bilateral competition between the USSR and the US of the first Cold War. The key contribution of this concept is in how it suggests that the three players are part of a game, and that the logic of this game drives their interaction. The exact nature of the game may vary but it is fundamentally about securing advantage and how alignment or lack of alignment with other players in the triangle alters the balance of relations and therefore advantage gained. It characterises international interactions as 'highly complex and not highly formalized'[16] in which actors seek to shape their own and others' outcomes according to the situation they see before them. Participants in a triangle, as per Dittmer's update to the original concept, should be sovereign and rational actors; bilateral interaction between two actors depends on their relationship with the third actor; and 'each must be deemed essential to the game insofar as its defection from one side to the other would critically shift the strategic balance'[17] The concept has tended to focus on international relations in Asia, emerging from the Cold War in East Asia where US-USSR confrontation had one clear third point: China; though it has also

been applied to other triangles such as US-China-Japan.[18] Configurations of geopolitics in East-Asia have been highly conducive to this triangular approach due to the lack of a clear hegemon, animosities within the East Asia region, and rapid shifts in the balance of power, largely due to China's rise.

The utility of a strategic triangle is in how it captures the actors within a particular dynamic and offers an interpretation for their actions, as derived from how they influence and interact with each other. It is not simply based on a consideration of their relative importance or power in the international system, though this is also important. The concept encourages a focus on the most important actors and adds depth to an analysis of a bilateral relationship to accommodate a more complex dynamic and account for the impact of a significant other actor. Furthermore, triangular thinking is intuitive and is a tool which simplifies analysis of international relations which is, by its nature, highly complex; as has been argued, it can be seen as a level of analysis in International Relations[19] and is a lens that is particularly apt to the study of great power competition with a small number of protagonists.

Placing the EU in a strategic triangle with the US and China, as is the approach of this paper, has not been a widely accepted framing to understand relations between the world's foremost economic blocs. However, the leading size of the EU, US and Chinese economies has naturally led to a general acknowledgement of the importance of all three actors and that they will be influential in determining global affairs. Shambaugh's[20] 2005 article is an early contribution to this emerging literature through its focus on this trilateral relationship and on interactions between the three. Cook et al's[21] 2021 article looks at EU-China-US relations and the hedging positions of the UK and Germany within a context of a rising China and unease over an America-first US. Even more recently, in this journal, the 2022 article 'The Implications of China's Rise for E.U.-U.S. Relations'[22] explains how symmetrical impacts on the EU and US from China's rise are more likely to lead to US-EU cooperation across four policy domains, a position this article picks up. However, few contributions theoretically explore EU-US-China triangular relations using Dittmer's strategic triangle concept. Engaging directly with this idea, Ross et al's[23] 2010 book argues that the EU-US-China triangular relationship should not be understood as a strategic triangle but as a 'diplomatic triangle'.[24] This, the editors argue, is because the relations do not determine the vital security interests of the players. I would suggest though, that the indivisibility of economic and national security which characterises the current geoeconomic period, means that the economic empirical area of diplomacy and economic statecraft I analyse here is intrinsically linked to vital security interests.[25] Another valuable contribution is Men et al's[26] edited volume on EU-US-China relations which also offers a theoretically-informed analysis and thematic sections on security and diplomacy, trade and the environment. This sought to address a gap in academic literature, in an area that, as the authors recognise, has tended to be the preserve of think tanks. It makes useful contributions highlighting the flux nature of global politics at present and the way the US looms large in EU-China relations.[27] It also points to the potential of strategic triangles, as being essentially 'ephemeral'[28] and domain dependent, which is useful, suggesting how a triangle may emerge in specific areas, but not define the relationship in its entirety or permanently.

Where I build on and depart from many of the existing contributions is that I argue EU-US-China economic relations show the characteristics of being in a strategic triangle, specifically in areas of economic exchange, and in particular as a result of the growth of technology as a driver of economic competition. It is important to clarify that I'm not arguing for using a strategic triangular lens for all aspects of EU-China-US relations, an idea which has been rightly rejected as not relevant for domains of diplomacy and security relations.[29] Specifically, I am arguing for the utility of the strategic triangle for understanding economic relations where digital and technology sector co-dependence and competition is rife, and where supply chains and technology sharing is internationalised and concentrated in the three large economic blocs of the EU, US and China.

Further considerations in bringing in the EU are the common problems of defining the EU as an actor within international relations. Analysing the EU within a strategic triangle is hampered by the supranational nature of the EU, that raises the problem that the EU is, arguably, not an entirely 'sovereign' nor coherent actor as per Dittmer's[30] updated criteria. Furthermore, unlike the US and China, the EU is not a comprehensive power actor; it is a normative power[31] and an economic behemoth which asserts some geopolitical power but without the full toolkit of statecraft levers. A focus on a single European state may also not be suitable as, individually, it is hard to argue they are 'essential to the game insofar as its defection from one side to the other would critically shift the strategic balance.'[32]

These mitigations against using the strategic triangle concept for the EU-China-US are now outweighed by contemporary factors. It is the economic size of the EU, as a collective, which gives it a place within a strategic triangle with China and the US and the size of the three-way trade relationships outweighs any other triangular relations in economic terms. The EU's trade competence and pursuit of strategic autonomy underpin it being considered a sovereign actor in areas of trade and economic relations. Furthermore, successive US administrations have sought to pivot to Asia and reduce involvement in Europe, creating more potential for strategic distance between the US and EU, and allowing space for a triangular conception of relations to be useful. In a world where US-China relations are defined by geoeconomic rivalry, the EU is the only genuine economic counterweight to this relationship.

Binding tactics within a strategic triangle

Binding, derived from strategic triangle literature, is one of the tactics[33][34] of choice within a strategic triangle, and describes how actors seek to maintain or enhance cohesion of an alliance.[35] Binding is pursued within the logic of the triangle, whereby the effects are considered beyond the purely bilateral relationship of the two states that are binding to also consider three-way relational dynamics and balance of power. Reasons for the use of binding tactics vary, often driven by one actor's concern over increasing alignment between the other two actors, or concerns over drift and growing distance in a relationship. Other motivations have also been highlighted, for example US desire to limit Japan's strategic independence through binding tactics.[36] Existing literature also suggests that binding can take both rewarding and coercive forms,[37] using proverbial carrots and sticks to shape relations. These tactics may vary depending on the particular

issue area or be used in combinations; and this may be due to factors such as successes or failures of previous tactics, or the extent of available options and resources. The most intuitive pattern in this configuration is reward binding, for example increased security cooperation to strengthen an alliance. The inverse, coercive binding may also exist and be seen in the example of tying another state into exclusive arrangements as a way to shape their interactions with a third party. Furthermore, coercive and rewarding tactics may be pursued simultaneously as part of a wider strategy, where, for example in the case of Moscow's relations with Eastern European states within the Soviet Union where economic and security benefits were used alongside threats of military action.[38]

US-EU binding tactics: New diplomatic forums for US-EU economic cooperation

US-EU economic diplomacy during the first Trump and Biden administrations through the forums of the Trilateral (US-EU-Japan) Meeting of Trade Ministers (TMTM), and the EU-US Technology and Trade council (TTC) are forms of reward binding. These forums sought to address mutual concerns and complaints regarding economic relations with China, and, crucially, they bound the EU closer to the US during periods of growing US-China rivalry, deep EU-China trade links, and tensions in wider EU-US relations. Collectively, these forums created areas of cooperation, first, in addressing the differences in China's economic model and the ways that China's state-capitalist economic practices undermine EU and US competitiveness; and second, technological advancement of the Chinese economy and the challenges this poses to US and EU competitiveness, prosperity and security. The rationales for these initiatives are clarified by the presence of China as a third point in the triangle of EU-US-China relations and explains US economic diplomacy during this period. The US used economic diplomacy as a way of binding with the EU to improve its strategic position in its rivalry with China and the TMTM and TTC are ways in which this was pursued.

Common EU-US positioning on Chinese economic practices

US and EU stances on China as a trade and investment partner became further aligned in substance during the first Trump administration and that of Biden. US policy and discourse on China as an economic actor has focused on the threat posed by the ways that Chinese trade practices deviate from US and EU trade norms, and the advances of the Chinese economy in technology sectors. Contributions to the US's discourse and policy on China as an economic threat received significant input under the first Trump administration.[39] In December 2017, the White House released its National Security Strategy, the first of the Trump administration, labelling China as a 'rival, 'revisionist power' and a 'strategic competitor'.[40] [41] Concerns over economic security feature significantly, with passages such as 'We welcome all economic relationships rooted in fairness, reciprocity, and faithful adherence to the rules... those who join this pursuit will be our closest economic partners. But the United States will no longer turn a blind eye to violations, cheating, or economic aggression.'[42] This language was more forceful than anything the EU had at this point communicated, showing, in part, a US determination to challenge Chinas' growing economic influence. This tone continued with the Biden administration's 2022 US National Security Strategy in which Chinese trade practices are again highlighted for how '[China] benefits from the openness of

the international economy while limiting access to its domestic market, and it seeks to make the world more dependent on the PRC while reducing its own dependence on the world.'[43]

This approach from the White House during the first Trump and Biden administration is supported by a range of investigations, communications and actions from the US trade bureaucracy. During this period, these include China's Trade-Disruptive Economic Model,[44] a communication from the US delegation to the WTO. The communication seeks to shape WTO members perceptions of the disruptive effect of China's economic model, focusing on the mechanics of China's non-market practices, and the costs to other nations and benefits to Chinese trade. The US Trade Representative's annual Reports to Congress on China's WTO Compliance contribute to the sceptical discourse on China's economic model, emphasising the patchy nature of Chinese compliance to WTO laws and that much of China's actions are not in the spirit of moving toward market-based economies, which was an expectation of WTO membership.[45] Special 301 Reports detail problems in IP enforcement; these reports are global in scope but have extensive reporting on issues with China, maintaining discursive pressure on trade issues with China. In particular, these highlight aspects of China's economic governance that forces US based (and EU based) companies to give trade technology and Intellectual Property (IP) for market access; licencing laws which discriminate against foreign firms operating in China; IP theft through cyber intrusions; the ways transferred technology are used to support the internationalisation of Chinese firms; and other means of acquiring and developing IP and technical know-how.[46]

In the EU, scepticism to trade and investment relations with China developed into policy later than in the US. One of the major turning points in the EU approach during this period was the 2019 document EU-China – A Strategic Outlook which formally marked this shift in EU approach to China as an investment partner. China was labelled an 'economic competitor' which has failed to 'reciprocate market access and maintain a level playing field.'[47] The report highlights how China uses industrial and economic policies to favour Chinese firms, provide anti-competitive support and build national champions. This statement emerged from many years of gradual shifts in EU discourse on China's economic presence, with 2017 marking the year that a mainstreaming of China-sceptical discourse and policy began to occur within the EU.[48] Policies which sought to limit Chinese investment for reasons of security were formulated by the EU including the EU investment screening framework which the European Commission began work on in 2017, and changes to EU competition policy from 2020 onwards to better address the impact of differing economic models and state intervention in external trade. Following this, the 2023 European Economic Security Strategy[49] formalised many of these trends into a more unified approach. Whilst a securitising process was occurring in the EU with regard to Chinese[50] trade and investment, particularly in technology sectors, the EU was also behind the US curve on confronting these challenges, with the US advancing this agenda and influencing policy and discourse in the EU.

The Trilateral Meetings of Trade Ministers

In December 2017, EU trade commissioner Cecilia Malmström, Japanese Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan Hiroshige Seko and US Trade Representative

Robert Lighthizer created a forum, later named the Trilateral Meeting of the Trade Ministers (TMTM). The trilateral meeting of trade ministers between the US, EU and Japan were primarily a feature of the first Trump administration and sought to develop alignment on countering Chinese economic practices. The US sought to use economic diplomacy to bind the EU, invoking shared EU-US trade norms and areas for cooperation. The stated purpose of the forum was to bring more cooperation in addressing concerns around 'severe excess capacity in key sectors exacerbated by government-financed and supported capacity expansion, unfair competitive conditions caused by large market-distorting subsidies and state-owned enterprises, forced technology transfer, and local content requirements and preferences.'[51]

It should be said here that Japan's involvement in this forum as a fourth actor does not render it obsolete to understanding EU-US-China triangular dynamics. This is because the TMTM involves the US and EU as two out of three of the parties, meaning they had important roles in this diplomatic forum which was a select grouping of partners. Furthermore, there is no indication that these meetings were a Japan dominated forum, meaning its helps understand US-EU motivations and actions in their economic diplomacy. It also shows the ways that external actors may be party to developments within a triangle in which they are not one of the three points.[52]

No.	Date	Key outcomes
1	12th Dec. 2017	Establishes agreement to working together to ensure a 'level playing field'. Communicates key concerns around: 1. Excess capacity 2. Government-financed and supported capacity expansion 3. Market-distorting subsidies 4. State owned enterprises (SOEs) 5. Forced technology transfer 6. Local content requirements and preferences
2	10th Mar. 2018	Communicates intended joint actions to: 1. Develop strong rules on subsidies 2. Improve WTO effectiveness 3. Better enforce existing WTO rules in trade disputes 4. More cooperation and information sharing, particularly on investment screening and trade distortive practices and sectoral initiatives, notably steel and semiconductors
3	31st May 2018	Scoping paper on industrial subsidies that identifies the following actions: 1. Need for greater transparency. Highlights issue of not knowing what happens within a country and the issue of WTO members not sharing information with the WTO 2. Issue of SOEs and how these can be accounted for in global trade. This particularly relates to market distorting behaviour of SOEs 3. Need for better subsidies rules Joint statement on Technology Transfer Policies and Practices: 1. Agreement on problems with regards to innovation, favouring domestic firms, challenges to IPR 2. Commitments to further cooperation
4	26th Sep. 2018	Key messages: 1. Need to work within WTO framework 2. Particular focus on SOE financing and subsidies 3. Particular focus on technology transfers: 'no country should require or pressure technology transfer from foreign companies to domestic companies' 4. Concerns about digital protectionism and data security
5	9th Jan. 2019	Key messages: 1. Invokes the term security to talk about investment screening: agreement to 'cooperate on enforcement, on the development of new rules, on investment review for national security purposes and on export controls'
6	23rd May 2019	Key messages: 1. Cooperation on WTO cases 2. Efforts to address SDT provisions at the WTO and issue of countries 'claiming developing country status'
7	14th Jan. 2020	Focused on subsidies and technology transfers. Key messages: 1. Joint statement says clearly that 'the Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures (ASCM) is insufficient to tackle market and trade distorting subsidization existing in certain jurisdictions' 2. Technology transfers are a useful part of international trade but discussed aims to prevent forced technology transfers
8	30th Nov. 2021	Meeting focused on WTO reform and challenges of non-market practices. Agreed to continue focusing on: 1. Problems from non-market practices 2. Gaps in enforcement rules 3. Identifying other problems

Table 1: Trilateral trade Minister Meetings. Source: European Commission and US Trade Representative

These trilateral meetings were framed as official meetings between ministers that would occur during multilateral meetings, such as the eleventh WTO Ministerial Conference in December 2017 where the initial intention to meet was communicated.

The meetings aimed to address shared concerns about state intervention in economies and the effects of this (see Table 1). The meetings also state that adjustments would be sought within the WTO framework; in line with the principle of Most Favoured Nation (MFN). China is not singled out for mention as the motivation for these coordinated actions reflecting a pattern seen in EU discourses on Chinese trade practices, where the issue of state capitalism is discussed as a general problem, a convention carried into this forum. The agendas of these meetings show how normative economic issues that inform much of the US and EU view of Chinese investment and trade are discussed, with efforts to cooperate in addressing the perceived problems of Chinese investment and trade practices. This shows the US binding with the EU on position and action regarding economic relations with China. Within the logic of a strategic triangle, this action isolates China, thereby weakening China's trade relations with its two largest trade partners.

The EU-US Trade and Technology Council

Alongside broad complaints from the US and the EU about Chinese economic practices and norms, technology specific concerns took a central place in EU-US cooperation on approaches to economic security regarding China. To collectively address this, the EU and the US established the EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC) in June 2021, with the establishment and subsequent meetings of the initiative occurring under the Biden administration. It was created to 'lead values-based global digital

No.	Date	Key outcomes
1	29th Sep. 2021	Establishment of joint principles on: AI, semiconductors, investment screening and export controls.
2	16th May 2022	Strategic Standardisation Information (SSI) mechanism set up to monitor developments and coordinate positions in international standard-setting bodies.
3	5th Dec. 2022	Joint roadmap for trustworthy AI and risk management. Agreements on semiconductors subsidy transparency and supply chain early warning mechanisms signed.
4	31st May 2023	First edition of EU-US Terminology and Taxonomy for Artificial Intelligence. Quantum Task Force established. Common standard for megawatt charging system of heavy-duty e-vehicles adopted.
5	30th Jan. 2024	G7 AI code of conduct endorsed. Industry roadmap for 6G.
6	5th Apr. 2024	Second edition of EU-US Terminology and Taxonomy for Artificial Intelligence. Minerals Security Partnership Forum established. Green public procurement best practices catalogue.

Table 2: EU-US Trade and Technology Council meeting outcomes. Source: European Commission.

transformation'[53] with the aim to 'coordinate approaches to key global technology, economic, and trade issues; and to deepen transatlantic trade and economic relations, basing policies on shared democratic values.'[54] This built on aspects of the work of the trilateral trade ministers' format and made the economic security aspects of technology and digitisation central in the agenda.

The Council was organised with ten working groups in the following thematic areas: Technology Standards; Climate and Clean Tech; Secure Supply Chains; ICTS Security and Competitiveness; Data Governance and Technology Platforms; Misuse of Technology Threatening Security & Human Rights; Cooperation on Export Controls

of Dual Use Items; Investment Screening Cooperation; Promoting SME Access To and Use of Digital Technologies; Global Trade Challenges. This forum was not explicitly designed to counter the digital-focused aspects of China's Belt and Road Initiative or Chinese techno-industrial policies, such as Made In China 2025; however, its scope is very similar and addresses thematic areas of economic activity where Chinese organisations have been identified as being competitive with US firms and posing an economic threat. This also exemplifies both the US's and the EU's geoeconomic turns in external trade relations and a more active coordinating role of government machinery in managing industrial and technological development. This grouping raised the geopolitics of technology, a core US concern related to China, to a more prominent place within US-EU economic relations.

Between September 2021 and April 2024 there were six ministerial level meetings of the TTC. The content and actions of these meetings show joint US-EU efforts to bind on shared standards, practices and outlooks in wide ranging areas of trade, emerging technologies, and connectivity (see Table 2).

The agenda and outcomes of these economic forums, the TMTM and TTC, show the EU and US bonded together on mutual economic concerns through a shared policy platform. What characterises these economic forums as a form of binding within a strategic triangle is the implicit focus on China. These shared concerns, whilst not explicitly stated as being aimed at China, were intended, in large part, to counter challenges in their economic relations with China. That these forums would have emerged without the influence of China as a third point is unlikely, for several reasons. First, the content of these forums aligns with long-standing concerns over the impacts of Chinese state-capitalism and China's technological rise. Second, the TMTM and TTC occurred alongside other forms of US economic statecraft which were explicitly directed at weakening China's economy and economic relations. For example: the US-led Clean Network which sought to limit Chinese involvement in other state's national telecommunications networks,[55] or US-led agreements to limit Dutch and Japanese firms' exports of semiconductor products and technologies to China.[56] Third, EU-US trade relations were at times fractious during this period meaning that it cannot be assumed that the TMTM and TTC would have occurred without the strategic imperative created by China. In a counter-factual scenario without an economic strategic triangle between China-EU-US, it is likely that the US would see the EU as its main economic rival and there would be less US-EU economic cooperation. What this shows is that the TMTM and the TTC were initiatives born of both US-China economic rivalry, and a shared US and EU interests in addressing the challenges of economic relations and technological competition with China.

Alternative and complementary explanations: EU agency and hedging

In this final section, I discuss alternative interpretations of what motivated EU action. This is a useful angle which contributes to a better understanding of this paper's main argument of EU-US binding within a strategic triangle. Whilst US motivation is understood through its economic rivalry with China; the EU is the pivot in the

strategic triangle and is potentially motivated by additional factors beyond a common interest in addressing economic challenges in its relations with China. First, I discuss the development of EU agency in its foreign and trade policy, as encapsulated by the Strategic Autonomy policy, and second, bring in the concept of hedging as an auxiliary analytical lens for understanding of how EU-US binding occurred within a strategic triangle with China.

EU agency within the triangle

Within the dynamics of a strategic triangle during this period, the EU was not a passive actor. US efforts to bind with the EU on economic issues were facilitated by a shared EU-US agenda on economic relations and, crucially, an EU willingness to engage. Because of this, US economic diplomacy with the EU as a counter to China met with success as US economic statecraft goals often aligned with EU policy and discursive shifts on its trade relations with China. In this respect, EU actions within this triangular dynamic should also be understood as part of a deliberate effort to assert autonomy. This sentiment is part of a turn in EU approaches to its external relations to become a more "geopolitical"[57] actor. Central to this shift is the EU's foreign policy concept of strategic autonomy, which defines how the EU should be able to act independently of other states in strategically important areas.[58] This emphasis on geopolitical autonomy contributes to the argument of this paper in two important ways.

First, it underscores the sense that the EU was an independent actor within the strategic triangle, adding validity to this conceptual framing. This is driven by what Josep Borrell, then EU High Commissioner for foreign affairs, when talking about the EU within US-China rivalry and competition, said: 'Following Frank Sinatra, we Europeans have to do things 'My Way.''[59] The EU was cautious of being a caught between US-China rivalry and sought to avoid being an afterthought to US and Chinese focus on each other.[60] Second, it shows the EU motivation to bind with the US was a deliberate move within the logic of strategic triangle, during a period when the EU could, in theory, have sought to align itself more closely with China as it asserted strategic autonomy. Growing EU scepticism to China and its self-proclaimed non-equidistant position within the triangle,[61] and its leaning[62] to the US, smoothed the path for EU-US binding; though this was not a given, particularly during the first Trump administration when the US pursued a coercive and confrontational trade policy with the EU. EU frustration with Chinese economic practices and its traditional closeness to the US helped create the conditions for the EU to remain closer to the US and cooperate with US through these forums, further binding it to the US.

EU economic hedging

A second explanation to consider is the idea of hedging; an approach of maximising strategic options, and 'avoid having to choose one stance at the expense of another.'[63] Based on a similar neorealist ontology of balance of power politics as the strategic triangle, this concept opens up the idea that EU-US binding can be seen as hedging strategy by the EU. In this lens, the EU pursues a strategy of alignment with the US, whilst retaining a degree of openness in economic relations with China, thereby pursuing avenues of cooperation with both parties. This supports the idea of the EU

as a pivot player in the triangle which is seeking to establish greater autonomy, balance both China and the US, and avoid over-reliance on either one. This explanation helps understand the mixed approach of the EU, in which rhetorical and policy moves away from China, and binding with the US through the TMTM and TTC are tempered by a persistent desire to maintain economic relations with China and pursue a strategy of de-risking, which stands in contrast to the US's decoupling mantra.

To further this interpretation, it is also useful to look at differences in EU trade relations during the two different US administrations, which suggests that hedging is a valuable lens for EU economic diplomacy during the first Trump administration. During the first Trump administration, Chinese inbound investment into the EU reached new peaks, whilst EU-US trade ties became more fraught as a result of Trump's America First trade policy. The TMTM can be seen as having a strong hedging element to it, in which a shared EU-US approach to economic relations with China balanced EU-US trade relations during a period of EU-US tensions and when economic ties with China were deepening. It also balanced EU economic relations with China by furthering EU trade interests in its complaints against China. During the Biden administration, however, the TTC is better understood as a tactic of binding with a less obvious hedging motivation. This is because EU had a less fractious economic relationship with the US during The Biden administration and had moved institutionally to address issues in its trade and investment relations with China through internal policies such as investment screening and competition policy.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the TMTM and the TTC during the first Trump and Biden administrations are best understood though the lens of an EU-US-China strategic triangle and that overlooking China's influence would fail to identify the drivers behind the TMTM and TTC as novel economic arrangements between the US and the EU. These formats of US-EU economic cooperation initiatives are intended to align the US and EU to better respond to specific Chinese strengths and challenges in global trade, binding them together on trade norms and standards, and combining efforts to maintain technological advantages where possible. These efforts directly address many of the complaints and concerns raised in US and EU trade discourses and offer a form of counter policy to Chinese trade and investment policies. Through this analysis, I have demonstrated the utility of the strategic triangle concept for use in an EU-US-China context, outside of its original setting in East Asian geopolitics, and shown that the EU can be considered a valid player within the logic of a strategic triangle. I found that operationalising this concept captures the dynamics of the TMTM and TTC as part of a wider geoeconomic turn, where China influences EU-US bilaterial trade relations.

The future trajectory of US-EU economic binding is unclear with recent developments during the early stages of Trump's economic diplomacy towards the EU a significant break from Biden's approach, and likely even more coercive than the first Trump administration. At present, the TTC appears to have stalled with no further meetings arranged, and the second Trump administration has significantly shifted EU-US dynamics with acts of what could be termed "self-wedging" of its relationship with the EU through tariff threats, diplomatic shunning, and significant doubts about the US's

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GENERAL
SECTION

General Section Introduction

As they navigate uncertain times, states seek allies and institutions to rely on. The General Section of the St Antony's International Review brings together four articles; two explore how strong institutions are prerequisites to addressing global challenges, while the two others highlight how domestic politics and identify shape foreign alliances, and vice versa. From Canada and Türkiye to Chile and the Democratic Republic of Congo, these papers offer an outlook on an unstable and sometimes unjust world, thus presenting a complementary picture to our Theme Section.

Ulas Akkus's article, Opening the Black Box of Turkish Foreign Policy: An Examination of AKP's Neo-Ottoman Shift, explores an often-misunderstood puzzle: the transformation of Türkiye from a democracy looking toward Europe to neo-Ottomanism. It unpacks the role of Erdoğan in instrumentalizing a confluence of domestic and international factors to drive the Justice and Development Party toward its neo-Ottomanist geopolitical shift.

Turning to Canada, Adin Chan unpacks the effects of Donald Trump's tariff threats and annexation rhetoric on Canadians' conception of their ontological security. His paper You Had a Friend in Me: Canada's Ontological Insecurity Under Trump shows how foreign alliances can be constitutive of a country's own identity, creating moments on ontological insecurity when they are shaken. In return, unsettled identities are met with reconfigurations of strategic cultures, which highlights the interconnectedness of domestic and foreign policy cultures.

Beyond power politics, our world's uncertainty stems from global challenges, in particular environmental degradation. Daria Blinova's Green Governance: Unveiling Factors Influencing Environmental Policy in Developing Countries investigates why some countries succeed in implementing environmental policies while others do not. Through statistical analysis and case studies on Chile and the DRC, she infers that democratization and the reduction of corruption are pre-requisites to successful environmental policies. Doing so, she challenges popular criticisms against the application of Western governance frameworks to low- and middle-income countries.

Finally, Charlotte Stevens's Competition law and the trading of humans: Investigating the nature and extent of the relationship between global antitrust legislation and human trafficking shows how gaps in competition law enable exploitation within global supply chains and labour markets. She argues that a more integrated and ambitious legal approach bridging competition, labour, and anti-corruption law is needed to address trafficking. Her paper is an invitation to greater multilateral legal cooperation, accounting for the globalized nature of production networks.

Taken together, the contributions of this general section underscore two key pressures facing states in a world paradoxically torn between increasing interconnectedness, transnational risks, and great power competition: the need to strengthen domestic and global institutions, and the imperative to negotiate shifting identities and alliances domestically and abroad.

Yacine Ouahioune,
General Section Editor

Opening the Black Box of Turkish Foreign Policy: An Examination of AKP's Neo-Ottoman Shift

Ulaş Akkuş

Abstract: *The meteoric rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) since the turn of the century has catalysed a significant metamorphosis in Turkish politics. Prevalently conceived as 'neo-Ottomanism', this paper will seek to examine the causes behind the party's geopolitical shift. Overall, it will argue that President Erdoğan capitalised on a rare 'window of opportunity' created by the diminishing Kemalist military and Western bloc. Particularly, it will demonstrate how Erdoğan's psychology was crucial in manipulating domestic structures and how his expansionist character filtered into his foreign policy. In doing so, it will offer an original model putting Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) at the centre. This model will be applied longitudinally, scrutinising the structure-agency dynamic determining 'neo-Ottomanist' foreign policy from Turgut Özal (1989-1993) to Erdoğan's second term (2007-2020). It will find that the Turkish military, the country's Western dependence and its parliament have acted as centripetal forces to change, with the psychology of leaders determining the success and extremity of 'neo-Ottoman' shifts. The principal contribution of the paper lies in uniting psychology and structure within a single framework, advancing the thin literature on foreign policy change and extending its scope beyond the narrow geographical and conceptual focus of much existing work.*

Foreign policy has a long tradition of being interpreted as the simple outcome of impersonal forces. Yet, even Kenneth Waltz (1959), the pioneer of neo-realism, conceded that individual leadership—the 'first image'—could spark conflict, though in a system he maintained was ultimately defined by structural anarchy. Similarly, Henry Kissinger, whose career was grounded in Realpolitik, admitted that "when you see it in practice, you see the difference personality makes" (Çuhadar et al., 2020:1). Leadership, in this sense, is consequential. It shapes how constraints are interpreted, how opportunities are perceived, and how far policy is pursued within or against existing boundaries, sometimes even generating entirely new ones. Of course, as with much of the Realist scholarship, Waltz and Kissinger caution against a psychological focus. To preserve systemic clarity, the discipline traditionally leaves the 'black box' of the state sealed – its static, unitary stature serving as a convenient simplification. To pry it open risks opening a Pandora's box, unleashing a multitude of variables—psychological, bureaucratic, cultural—that threaten neat systemic models. Yet, their own reflections highlight the limits of this abstraction. Building on this, psychological approaches within foreign policy analysis (FPA) have demonstrated that individual-level traits are central in conditioning decision-making. They show that these variations should be regarded as

traits with profound and measurable implications for the trajectory of foreign policy, not just anecdotal quirks.

The case of Turkey, with its historically personalistic political tradition, illustrates this dynamic with unusual clarity. This is especially true of the past two decades, where the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has repeatedly cast the nation as the heir to a civilisational mission that transcends its modern borders (İletişim Başkanlığı, 2024; AK Parti Resmî Sitesi, 2022; Medyascope, 2025). Within this, the invocation of the Misak-ı Millî (National Pact) has become a recurrent motif. For instance, Erdoğan described Syria as a "domestic matter" in 2011, later insisting that Turkey's deep involvement was natural because "we are the successors of the Ottoman state... the descendants of the Seljuks and Ottomans" (Al-Habib, 2025). In 2018, he went further still, declaring northern Syria part of the Misak-ı Millî and dismissing the Damascus regime's legitimacy by claiming Turkish presence was sanctioned by "the invitation of the Syrian people" (Al-Habib, 2025). These examples reveal a consistent rhetorical strategy: Ottoman memory repurposed to legitimise contemporary interventions. More lightly, this strategy has been particularly evident in Turkey's outreach to the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Turkic states, where appeals to shared ethno-religious and linguistic identities have reinforced a sense of civilisational kinship. The literature has widely characterised this orientation as a 'neo-Ottoman' turn, noting its resonance with Ottoman-era pan-Islamist and pan-Turkic ambitions, as well as its expansionist undertones (Hoffmann, 2019; Haugom, 2019; Akca, 2019).

This geographically overreaching discourse has likewise been matched with a notable orientation away from a strict Western posture. One of the most emblematic moments in this broader recalibration occurred on 29 January 2009, at the World Economic Forum in Davos. In a heated exchange with Israeli President Shimon Peres over the latest Gaza offensive, Erdoğan vociferously condemned Israel's actions before storming off stage (Kesgin, 2020). While some dismissed it as spectacle designed for domestic consumption, the episode resonated far beyond the panel itself. Indeed, Davos crystallised a semiotic break from Erdoğan's self-fashioned image as a conciliatory 'Western democrat', inaugurating a more confrontational posture towards Western powers and its pivot in the Middle East (Koç, 2011). Since then, this frictional style has grown more systematic. Erdoğan has castigated the United Nations for privileging the five permanent members of the Security Council, repeating the refrain that "the world is bigger than five" (Aral, 2020). His critiques have extended to the European Union (EU), which he has labelled "fascist and cruel," and to Germany, where he accused policymakers of "Nazi practices" (Sanchez, 2017). While such provocations may appear as theatrical invective, their function is more strategic. They form part of a deliberate scheme to construct the West as the moral antithesis against which Turkey positions itself as a 'virtuous power' (Langan, 2017).

Though the world stage has become well-accustomed to Erdoğan's international conduct, it is worth reminding that this 'neo-Ottoman' challenge to Turkey's Westernised status-quo was far from evident at the advent of AKP. One might easily forget that Erdoğan was once devoutly, or seemingly so, committed to Western 'modernisation', with many labelling Turkey during this time as an Islamic beacon of democracy and a

theory-busting specimen for Huntington's (1996) 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis (Akyol, 2009). However, the puzzle here is not restricted to the stark metamorphosis of Erdoğan from a Western democrat to a somewhat caricatured image of an "Ottoman Caliph" (Ayesh, 2018). Indeed, this religion-infused shift is seemingly perplexing given Turkey's historically secular, broadly isolationist and rigidly Western architecture – which was coercively maintained by the powerful Kemalist military since the Republic was created. The vitriolic stance towards the EU is likewise baffling given Turkey's dependence on the organisation as a trading partner and as a crucial financier for its debilitating refugee issue. The simple question here, then, is: 'what explains AKP's 'neo-Ottoman' shift?'.

In addressing this, it will be argued that Erdoğan not only exploited a 'window of opportunity' for change but actively widened it. Indeed, by deftly manipulating the barriers to geopolitical autonomy—most notably the weakening of the Kemalist military—Erdoğan exploited the structures that had long preserved the status quo (Kingdon, 1984). Specifically, by employing Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA), it will be shown that Erdoğan's political aptitude and his world view were vital in not only achieving foreign policy change (FPC), but making it distinctly 'neo-Ottoman'. To demonstrate this, considering that Erdoğan is not the only 'neo-Ottoman' leader in Turkish history, a longitudinal analysis will be adopted to contrast times of change and stability, thereby capturing the constitutive structure-agency dynamic of AKP's geopolitical project. Accordingly, the paper will begin by conceptualising and providing a brief history of 'neo-Ottomanism' – categorising it by the ideology's inception (1989-1997), decline (1997-2007) and rise (2007-2020). It will then provide a theoretical overview of the integrated models proposed in the FPC literature, drawing on cyclical, structural-constraint, and checklist approaches, and modifying them through the incorporation of LTA. Finally, before concluding with a brief discussion, this novel framework will be applied to the phases of 'neo-Ottomanism', looking at the international and domestic constraints, as well as the psychological traits of leaders in interacting with these structures and catalysing FPC.

Conceptualising Neo-Ottomanism and Foreign Policy Change (FPC)

In assessing the causal mechanisms behind Turkey's 'neo-Ottoman' shift, it is imperative to disambiguate this nebulous term. Though becoming a somewhat grating buzzword across certain policy and media circles, as expansively as possible, neo-Ottomanism should be understood to be a movement away from the country's strategic vision from Kemalism, an isolationist stance best-captured in its 'peace at home, peace abroad' motto (Bein, 2017). Of course, given its geostrategic position, it has hardly had the privilege of replicating Finnish or Swiss isolationism. Indeed, though Turkey was able to remain neutral for most of the Second World War, the Soviet expansion on its borders reformed its isolationism, pushing it into an almost perfect geopolitical alignment with the West (Yavuz, 2016). Still, besides certain exceptions like the 1974 Cyprus invasion, its international engagement was passive during this period – with Kemalists limiting Turkey's geopolitical involvement to spring-boarding NATO operations (Murinson, 2006). With this former outlook in mind, neo-Ottomanism must first be understood as a break from its insularity towards a more independent, engaging geopolitical

orientation (Yavuz, 2016). Particularly, one which draws upon ethno-religious, cultural and linguistic characteristics of the Ottoman empire, in an attempt to construct a collective geopolitical identity with its neighbourhood and beyond (Haugom, 2019). The haziness surrounding the concept beyond this arises from the Ottoman empire's subjective character. After all, the principles that neo-Ottomanism is built upon are determined by how the empire is conceived by leaders and how this transposes onto Turkish foreign policy (Danforth, 2014).

Some caution that this fluidity has made neo-Ottomanism a 'misnomer', inflated by sensationalist readings that obscure the pragmatic dimensions of Turkish foreign policy (Danforth, 2020; Hartmann, 2013; Piotrowska, 2017; Çağaptay, 2010). And there is value to these observations. Erdoğan's geopolitical strategy is defined above all by pragmatism, with neo-Ottomanism functioning less as an autonomous, abstracted project than as one of its most effective tools and expressions. Nonetheless, in defining the concept in an analytically productive way, three distinct 'images' of the Ottoman empire have usefully been outlined by Wastnidge (2019), delineating how this imperial heritage has been mobilised in constructing 'neo-Ottomanism'. The first perceives the Ottomans as an Islamic empire, accordingly picturing neo-Ottomanism as a pan-Islamist foreign policy seeking cohesion amongst Muslim states (Wastnidge, 2019; Dönmez, 2010). Wastnidge (2019) also outlines a more cultural element that can be rearticulated from the Ottoman Empire, specifically its image as an 'apex of civilisation'. This notion denotes an inherited duty to continue the historical role of the Ottomans as a cultural leader, not only reinvigorating ethno-linguistic and religious values in the region, but also diffusing these principles across the globe (Westnidge, 2019). The final visualisation pictures the Ottomans as a cosmopolitan, multicultural empire which lacks antagonism, conceiving itself from the economic and cultural liberalism of the empire's 'Golden Age' (Westnidge, 2019). What emerges, then, is an understanding of neo-Ottomanism as a deliberately elastic construct. One that derives its force from the ability to discursively reconfigure the Ottoman legacy—whether Islamic, civilisational, or cosmopolitan—into forms suited to contemporary foreign policy agendas.

Foreign Policy Change (FPC)

Before turning to the historical development of the ideology, it is important to clarify what is meant by foreign policy change (FPC). The literature on FPC is extensive and at times diffuse, yet Hermann's (1990) four-level typology remains useful in providing analytical clarity. At its most limited, an adjustment change involves shifts in the scope of geopolitical engagement without altering the underlying orientation of policy. The next stage, program change, refers to modifications in the instruments, strategies, or methods through which foreign policy goals are pursued. At the third level, problem change captures transformations in the very objectives of foreign policy, marking a departure from prior purposes. Finally, Hermann identifies the most far-reaching form, international orientation change, in which the entire set of geopolitical alignments is restructured, signalling a fundamental redefinition of a state's place in the international system. Taken together, this typology provides a graded framework for evaluating both the scale and nature of shifts in foreign policy.

Brief History of Neo-Ottomanism

Inception (1989-1997)

The beginnings of neo-Ottomanism can be traced back to Turgut Özal (1989-1993), whose break from Kemalist insularity, though impressive, was limited to an 'adjustment' and minor 'program' change. In terms of his vision, Özal sought to reinterpret Turkey as a cosmopolitan, multicultural power (Çandar, 2021). A significant branch of this was a focus on engaging its Turkic neighbours, pushing the idea that the coming century would prove to be 'the century of the Turk' (Makovsky, 1999). This was principally pursued through means of soft power, like organising the first Ankara summit between Turkic states in 1992 (Winrow, 1997). Though Özal also pursued military involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh, he failed to attain the necessary parliamentary approval for such an intervention (Cakir, 2014). More successfully, he organised an emergency meeting of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), coalescing support to push the Security Council towards military involvement in Bosnia (Hintz, 2018).

Importantly, although Özal was a devout Muslim, he particularly honed his Ottoman inspiration from the 'Golden Age' (Yavuz, 2020). Indeed, as well as cosmopolitanism, Özal stressed the European character of this era, seeing the empire as a southern European, Western force (Ocak, 2003). Combined together, he viewed a Western-orientation as something necessary to propel Turkey as a liberal, democratic and economically powerful nation (Yavuz, 2020). This pro-Western departure from Kemalist isolationism was seen most explicitly in Özal's support of the Americans in Iraq, amassing troops on the border and leading the sanctions from its Kirkuk-Yumurtalik oil pipeline – though he was ultimately restrained from opening a second war front against Hussein (Çakir, 2014). Another crucial relationship that was struck up to fortify this pro-Western activism was with Israel, basing this on a mutually beneficial military and economic partnership (Makovsky, 1999).

Erbakan's premiership, which concluded in 1997, offered a markedly different vision. His government explicitly re-invoked the Ottoman legacy through a decidedly 'Islamic' lens, advancing a foreign policy grounded in the anti-Western ideological positions he had championed as a cleric since the 1970s (Makovsky, 1997). Indeed, Erbakan explicitly positioned himself against NATO, the EU, and what he characterised as American imperialism, as well as its Israeli proxy. Both during the 1995 election campaign and once in office, he pledged to terminate Turkey's participation in Operation Provide Comfort in Iraq and to annul the country's existing defence agreements with Israel (Makovsky, 1997). This was coupled with a distinct, pan-Islamist vision towards the East, intending to form an economic and military collective with Muslim states, with the so-called 'D-8' providing an alternative to NATO and the G-7 (Makovsky, 1997). This ambitious attempt at an 'international orientation' change ultimately failed to materialise, and with Erbakan's forced departure from office under military pressure, 'neo-Ottomanism' entered a period of decline.

Decline (1997-2007)

The succeeding Ecevit government (1997-2002) was indeed devoid of such neo-Ottoman rhetoric, unsurprisingly so given the leader's membership of the secular Kemalist flank

(Laçiner, 2010). The alignment with the West was also reinstated, though Ecevit was not afraid to dip outside of this. For instance, despite taking the first concrete steps towards the European accession process, his stance towards the union became assertive following its refusal of official candidature in 1997 (Park, 2000). This hostility was deepened in 1999, where Turkey was offered the acceptance of its application in what was perceived to be an insultingly conditional form (Park, 2000). Besides this, there was no real active involvement in geopolitics, owing to the economic crises of the period and Ecevit's contentment with the Kemalist status quo (Aydin, 2000).

Likewise, the first term of the incoming AKP party (2002-2007), led by Erdoğan, was limited in its international engagement. The only substantive attempt to do so was joining the American military coalition in the 2003 Iraq War, which failed to obtain the necessary parliamentary approval (Kesgin and Kaarbo, 2010). The vital Incirlik base was offered for US operations into Iraq, however, and the American alignment was fortified in economic and military partnerships during this period (Kesgin and Kaarbo, 2013). Besides this, the 2004 Annan Plan, intended to assuage Turkey's quarrels in Cyprus and its accession bid, was the furthest AKP could deviate from Kemalism (Kalyoncu, 2005). Overall, the focus of the party was internal, implementing dozens of reforms in line with the Copenhagen Criteria and providing considerable improvements in the livelihood of Kurds and religious minorities in Turkey (Goff-Taylor, 2017). Some observers have read the preceding reforms of democratisation and pluralism as reflecting a liberal, multicultural reimagining of the Ottoman legacy (Wastnidge, 2019). Yet there was no clear articulation of these policies as constituting a fundamental geopolitical reorientation. Rather, the Europeanisation project now appears more plausibly understood as a strategic effort to curb the entrenched influence of the Kemalist military—an objective that proved pivotal in paving the way for the subsequent emergence of a more explicitly Islamic-oriented 'neo-Ottomanism' (Çağaptay, 2020).

Rise (2007-2020)

The contemporary 'neo-Ottomanism' of the AKP has been characterised by a conscious departure from strict adherence to the Western metropole, reframing Turkey's role from that of a peripheral "wing country" (kanat ülke) to asserting its 'rightful' historical claim as a "central power" (merkez ülke) (Sözen, 2010: 112). This 'apex of civilisation' image is firmly lined with an Islamic conception of the Ottomans, drawing on the reign of Abdülhamid II as the virtuous defender of the ostracised periphery against the West (Yavuz, 2020). This geopolitical 'us and them' demarcation is mostly exercised through 'soft power' and 'win-win' situations with its Islamic in-group, like providing humanitarian relief across the Middle East and Africa (Maziad and Sotiriadis, 2020). Despite ongoing friction, this religious affinity can also be seen in AKP's rapprochement with Iran during the 2010s, most prominently by advocating for its nuclear programme during that time (Görener and Uçal, 2011). This departure from the West was also observed in its collaboration with Russia, specifically with its Astana alliance in Syria and the acquisition of S-400 missiles (Matsumoto, 2021). With the EU accession process being firmly shelved, Erdoğan has also pursued an antagonising approach in the Mediterranean, defying UN convention and creating its own 18.6 nautical mile maritime boundary (Neset et al., 2021). Less intensely, Turkey has turned East with its 'Asia Anew' initiative, becoming a dialogue partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in

2013 (Islam, 2020). Overall, however, despite clearly marking an adjustment, program and problem change, these various shifts do not amount to a fundamental shift. Turkey is still considerably Western facing and has not rescinded its Western membership, as is frequently sensationalised by the media (Oğuzlu, 2012). Such a move would require something astronomical – like leaving NATO, not just being a problematic partner of it (Haugom, 2019).

Theoretical Overview

Although 'neo-Ottomanism' has recently been in the limelight, change is an area in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) literature in which there is a substantial deficiency, especially in non-Western countries like Turkey (Hudson, 2008; Alden, 2017). Still, the transient scholarly attention this branch has received understands the phenomenon as multi-causal, demarcating the need for an integrative approach (Goldmann, 1982; Hermann, 1990; Carlsnaes, 1992; Rosati, 1994; Gustavsson, 1999). Nonetheless, not only has there been no attempt at this in Turkey, many integrative FPC models are lacking in their theoretical construction. In seeking to propose an updated model and apply it to the 'neo-Ottoman' shift, the paper will review the dominant integrative frameworks in the FPC literature, demarcating it along Gustavsson's (1999) examination and classification of integrative models. Overall, it will identify the greatest potential in the checklist framework, while recognising the value of enriching it with elements of cyclical and structural-constraint models.

Structural-Constraint Models

Structural-constraint models interpret foreign policy change (FPC) largely in terms of the obstacles that prevent it. Goldmann's (1982) influential 'input–output' framework traces how external or internal pressures for change are filtered through decision-making mechanisms before becoming policy outcomes. At each stage, stabilisers—cognitive, international, political, and administrative—intervene to blunt transformative impulses (Carlsnaes, 1993). For Goldmann, these stabilisers, rather than the sources of change themselves, are decisive. Their durability explains why FPC is infrequent, typically occurring only when stabilisers erode. Skidmore (1996) extends this logic by combining realist and institutionalist traditions. Realism allows for incremental, 'evolutionary' adjustment as states respond to shifts in international structure, while institutionalism highlights domestic inertia, producing more 'sporadic' change. Skidmore argues that evolutionary change is most likely when states are externally weak but domestically strong, enabling them to adapt to international shocks while containing internal resistance. Change, then, arises when external resilience shields states from pressures but weak domestic institutions leave them vulnerable to internal blockages.

Together, structural-constraint models reframe FPC as the product of constraint. Yet, this prioritisation of structures comes at a cost. Skidmore (1996), in particular, reduces the state to a monolithic unit, leaving little room for the interpretive agency of decision-makers. Goldmann (1982; 2014) is more attentive to how 'sources' exert pressure, but his interactive mechanisms remain convoluted, especially regarding 'administrative stabilisers.' Moreover, despite his emphasis on 'ideas' and 'rethinking,' the role of individuals is marginal, confined to the organisations they inhabit. Goldmann (2014:

23) explicitly limits psychological approaches, prioritising "organisational rather than individual thinking", thereby neglecting the introspective influence of singular decision-makers (Carlsnaes, 1993).

Cyclical Models

Contrastingly, cyclical models emphasise the longitudinal evolution of foreign policy, highlighting the oscillating interactions that shape change over time (Gustavsson, 1999). Carlsnaes (1993) addresses the agency–structure problem directly, presenting FPC as the outcome of reciprocal interaction between individual decision-makers and systemic constraints. To illustrate this, he adopts Archer's (1995) morphogenetic cycle, a three-step, temporally linear but cyclical progression model. Structures initially condition agents (T1), who then engage and interact with those structures (T2–T3), ultimately reshaping them into new forms that launch a fresh cycle (Newman, 2019). Applied to foreign policy, this framework captures how decision-makers and systemic factors continually reconstitute one another, producing gradual change across time. Rosati (1994), by contrast, offers a more straightforward dialectical reading of twentieth-century American foreign policy. He divides the century into long periods of stability, punctuated by short transitional phases when foreign policy fails to adapt to systemic shifts in the international, institutional, or domestic spheres (Gustavsson, 1999). These moments of crisis compel adjustment and restore stability.

The strength of cyclical models lies in their ability to capture the incremental character of FPC, offering historical accounts that exceed the snapshot explanations of other models. Yet this breadth comes with limitations. Carlsnaes' (1993) framework, while theoretically sophisticated in linking structure and agency, is too intricate to serve as a practical tool for empirical analysis and has rarely been applied. Rosati's model, though far more accessible, suffers from vagueness in specifying how agents actively generate change—perhaps a consequence of the century-long timeframe it seeks to cover (Roberts, 1994).

Checklist Models

Finally, checklist models adopt a linear, tripartite process: identifying factors that trigger FPC, examining how these are filtered through decision-making, and tracing how this interaction produces change. Hermann's (1990) influential model typifies this approach, categorising leaders, bureaucracy, and domestic and international restructuring as distinct 'sources' of FPC (Haar and Pierce, 2021). These sources are channelled through a seven-stage decision-making sequence, beginning with problem diagnosis and culminating in the implementation of a new policy orientation (Hermann, 1990). Similarly, Holsti (2015) distinguishes external, domestic, historical, and cultural factors as inputs into the decision-making machinery, with intervening variables—such as leadership personalities or bureaucratic dynamics—acting as constraints on how far these drivers can reshape policy (Haesebrouck and Joly, 2021).

Crucially, neither Hermann nor Holsti present predictive theories. Rather, they offer flexible analytical frameworks for examining specific cases of FPC (Carlsnaes, 1993). This broad applicability remains one of the checklist model's strongest assets (Gustavsson, 1999). Yet the approach carries clear limitations. By conceptualising decision-making

primarily as a filtering mechanism, checklist models sharply restrict the scope for individuals to shape policy as active agents (Carlsnaes, 1993). This critique may be overstated in Hermann's case, since his framework does contain references to direct authoritative action by leaders and bureaucrats (Hermann, 1990: 10). Nonetheless, even where agency is acknowledged, its role is largely reduced to providing external stimuli for an otherwise static decision-making unit, rather than constituting an integral and dynamic part of the process (Carlsnaes, 1993).

Modifying the Checklist Model

To address this neglect of cognition and agency, Gustavsson (1999) advances a modified checklist model. While retaining the view that structural movements are the primary sources of change, he inserts an independent stage explicitly centred on the individual. Leaders are seen as interpretive agents, whose perceptions determine whether structural shifts are recognised as legitimate drivers of FPC. Only once filtered through this interpretive lens do developments proceed into the decision-making arena. Importantly, individuals remain active here as well, engaged in the political "pulling and hauling" required to persuade bureaucratic and collective actors to endorse policy change (Gustavsson, 1999: 84). If successful, this culminates in FPC, with the potential for agentic feedback effects that reshape domestic and international structures. Anticipating critiques of vagueness regarding timing, Gustavsson conceptualises decision-makers as "policy entrepreneurs" who exploit structural "windows of opportunity" (Kingdon, 1984; Barnett, 1999). Overall, Gustavsson's (1999) revision significantly strengthens the checklist model by embedding agency more centrally into the process, without sacrificing structural sensitivity. It is this more balanced framework that provides the foundation for the following model, albeit with key adaptations.

Towards an Integrated Model

The proposed framework builds on Gustavsson's (1999) model but expands it in several important respects. First, while Gustavsson originally designed his model to account for singular instances of FPC, here it will be applied longitudinally to trace the diachronic evolution of 'neo-Ottomanism.' In this respect, the model incorporates insights from cyclical approaches, emphasising how foreign policy unfolds across time through periods of continuity and rupture. This adjustment allows the framework to capture not only episodic instances of change but also broader trajectories of transformation. Second, the model integrates Carlsnaes' (1993) structure–agency dynamic, recognising that foreign policy is shaped by the continual interaction between systemic pressures and decision-makers. This means that shifts in Turkey's international and domestic standing—such as the balance of power in global politics, the role of NATO and EU accession processes, or fluctuations in civil–military relations—must be considered alongside the interpretive agency of leaders in determining the direction and scope of change. Here, Skidmore's (1996) internal–external power thesis provides additional nuance. The model foregrounds how Turkey's relative strength or vulnerability in the international system intersects with its domestic institutional capacity to produce shifts in foreign policy. In practical terms, this means the model will situate the rise of neo-Ottomanism within regional and global geopolitical currents, as well as the backdrop of domestic institutional reconfigurations – especially the weakening of the Kemalist military and the consolidation of parliamentary authority.

Third, and most crucially, the role of the individual will be substantially deepened. Gustavsson (1999) already assigns leaders an interpretive function, but here this is enriched through the incorporation of Hermann's Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA). LTA enables systematic assessment of leaders' personal characteristics which shape how they perceive structural pressures, identify opportunities, and pursue change. Within this model, LTA is used to determine who qualifies as a 'policy entrepreneur', their capacity to exploit 'windows of opportunity,' and the style through which they advance foreign policy reorientation. This integration of LTA into FPC, at such a comprehensive level, is, to the best of my knowledge, novel. The only prior attempt to combine the two has been Yang's (2010) comparative analysis of Clinton and Bush's China policies, which concentrated on differences in conceptual complexity. While an important contribution, the scope of that study was necessarily confined. By contrast, the proposed model incorporates a broader set of LTA characteristics, allowing for a more complete picture of how leadership psychology interacts with foreign policy change over a considerable historical period.

Methodology

To briefly outline how this model will be applied, the temporal structure will reflect the three phases of neo-Ottomanism previously delineated – its inception, downfall and rise. This sequential form will allow for a broad comparison between times of change and stability, allowing an insight into the evolving structure-agency dynamics determining FPC (Carlsnaes, 1993). In this chronological organisation, the international and domestic contexts will begin the analysis in each phase, following Gustavsson's (1999) model. The international dimension will encompass geopolitical power configurations, as well as patterns of military and economic capacity and dependency. Put differently, a window of opportunity for change is expected to emerge when the international environment presents an opening—most likely in the form of a structural shift or crisis. As a traditionally tame country seeking more influence, Turkey is hypothesised to be more sensitive to these changes (Skidmore, 1996). The exploitation of such openings will depend on Turkey's comparative advantages in military or economic strength, which may encourage a more assertive regional role.

Correspondingly, an 'Eastern' orientation is most likely where Turkey demonstrates greater economic and military independence from the West, or where its national interests come into fundamental conflict with Western priorities. The domestic arena, in turn, will be evaluated through the distribution of parliamentary power and the strength of institutional actors—most notably the military, which has been a decisive force in the Turkish context. In line with Skidmore's (1996) thesis, the expectation is that the greater the electoral dominance of a governing agent, and the greater its leverage over the military, the more likely it becomes that a foreign policy change will materialise. Building on this structural assessment, LTA will then be applied to examine the psychological profiles of leaders within their respective periods, focusing on how they behave with and within these international and institutional constraints.

LTA

At this stage, a comprehensive summary of LTA is in order. The framework rests on the premise that verbal expressions—whether written or spoken—offer systematic insight into the cognitive and personality traits of political leaders (Hermann, 2005). To operationalise this, textual material is compiled, coded and processed through the ProfilerPlus software, which generates psychological profiles of the leaders under study (Kesgin, 2020). The profiling identifies seven core characteristics, each operationalised through specific patterns of discourse, as outlined below:

Trait	Description	Coding Guidelines
Belief in Ability to Control Events (BACE)	Extent to which leaders perceive themselves as capable of shaping or directing the political environment.	Measured through the proportion of verbs expressing action, intention, or planning attributed to the leader or their group.
Need for Power (PWR)	Inclination to gain, maintain, or reinforce personal or group power.	Calculated from verbs that imply exerting influence, directing others, advising, or protecting one's reputation.
Conceptual Complexity (CC)	Capacity to recognise, differentiate, and interpret the nuances of political situations.	Derived from the relative frequency of nuanced language (e.g., 'approximately', 'possibly', 'likely') versus absolutist terms (e.g., 'certainly', 'irreversible').
Self-Confidence (SC)	Perceived sense of self-importance and belief in ability to act effectively in political contexts.	Indicated by the proportion of self-referential pronouns (e.g., 'I', 'me', 'myself', 'mine') that convey authority, initiative, or claims to credit.
In-Group Bias (IGB)	Tendency to see one's own group as central to political life and superior to others.	Identified through references that emphasise group strength, success, or unity (e.g., 'capable', 'defend our borders', 'decide our policies').
Distrust of Others (DIS)	Degree of suspicion, scepticism, or concern about the intentions of actors outside one's group.	Tracked by the use of nouns signalling misgivings, hostility, or perceived threats from outsiders.
Task Orientation (TASK)	Focus on achieving objectives and problem-solving, as opposed to relationship-building.	Reflected in words tied to instrumental aims (e.g., 'plan', 'proposal', 'accomplishment') versus relational terms (e.g., 'collaboration', 'appreciation', 'amnesty').

Table 1: LTA Personality Characteristics. Adapted from Çuhadar et al. (2020: 25)

More than their individual parts, the combination of these characteristics is considered crucial for the foreign policy behaviour of individuals.

1. Response to Constraints (BACE × PWR)

The first such interaction is Response to Constraints (BACE × PWR), which considers the relationship between a leader's Belief in Ability to Control Events (BACE) and their Need for Power (PWR). This pairing reveals how leaders position themselves vis-à-vis institutional, domestic, or international constraints. Leaders with low scores on both traits function as Constraint Respectors, working within established parameters, emphasising compromise and privileging consensus-building. By contrast, those with high scores on both dimensions are Optimum Challengers, combining direct and indirect methods of influence to actively reshape their environments and achieve objectives. A low PWR–high BACE configuration produces Direct Challengers, who favour open and explicit strategies, approaching constraints with clarity and assertiveness. This can be effective in contexts that reward decisiveness, though it may be excessive or reduce opportunities for behind-the-scenes adaptation. Conversely, leaders with high PWR but low BACE emerge as Indirect Challengers, adept at exerting influence behind the scenes. In the context of neo-Ottoman policy entrepreneurs, we would expect them to fall predominantly within the challenger categories—optimum, direct, or indirect—given the centrality of resisting and transforming constraints in advancing this foreign policy orientation.

		Belief in Ability to Control Events (BACE)	
		Low	**High**
Need for Power (PWR)	**Low**	**Constraint Respector:** works within established limits to achieve objectives. Emphasises compromise and consensus-building.	**Direct Challenger:** Challenges constraints openly and explicitly, relying on direct use of power.
	High	**Indirect Challenger:** Challenges constraints but tends to do so indirectly. More comfortable exerting influence behind the scenes.	**Optimum Challenger:** Challenges constraints, demonstrating skill in both direct and indirect influence.

Table 2: Leaders' Orientation to Constraints. Adapted from Çuhadar et al. (2020: 26)

2. Openness to Information (CC × SC)

The second interaction is Openness to Information (CC × SC), which combines a leader's Conceptual Complexity (CC)—the capacity to recognise and integrate multiple perspectives—with their Self-Confidence (SC), or the degree of trust placed in their own judgement. The balance of these traits determines whether leaders adopt an open or closed orientation toward information. Leaders whose conceptual complexity exceeds their self-confidence tend to remain open, carefully weighing external input and alternative viewpoints. By contrast, when self-confidence outweighs conceptual complexity, leaders exhibit a closed orientation, dismissing or filtering information through rigid assumptions. Similarly, when both traits score above average, leaders are generally open to new information, whereas low scores on both dimensions are associated with an unresponsive style. It follows that those with higher conceptual complexity than self-confidence are best positioned to identify windows of opportunity and, in turn, catalyse foreign policy change.

Complexity and Confidence Traits	Orientation Toward Information
Conceptual Complexity > Self-confidence	Open
Conceptual Complexity < Self-confidence	Closed
Both traits above average	Open
Both traits below average	Closed

Table 3: Openness to Information. Adapted from Çuhadar et. al (2020:27)

3. Motivation (IGB x DIS x TASK)

The last combination to consider is the interplay between ingroup bias and distrust of others, which determines a leader's basic orientation toward the international environment. Relatedly, Task Focus reveals how the resulting worldview is operationalised. In-group bias signals the degree of emotional attachment to the leader's own group, while distrust captures the extent of suspicion toward external actors. These two traits define whether the international environment is imagined as open, uncertain, competitive, or outright hostile. Task Focus then inflects this orientation, distinguishing leaders who pursue their aims through problem-solving from those who privilege loyalty and relationship maintenance.

Leaders low in both in-group bias and distrust perceive the world as pragmatic and opportunity rich. For those high in Task Focus, this becomes a platform for policy

entrepreneurship: coalition-building and a willingness to harness cooperation for concrete problem-solving. With low TASK, the same benign worldview is refracted through the imperatives of recognition and prestige, producing leaders who treat the international stage as a space for cultivating alliances, exchanging gestures of goodwill, and reinforcing reputational standing. When distrust is high but IGB remains low, leaders imagine the environment as precarious and conflict-prone. High Task Focus here produces a technocratic vigilance, where monitoring adversaries, strengthening intelligence, and devising defensive strategies become central. By contrast, low TASK in this setting generates a more relational caution, with leaders relying on carefully managed partnerships and symbolic demonstrations of reliability to navigate uncertainty.

At the opposite pole, leaders with high IGB but low distrust see the world as competitive yet rule governed. Those high in TASK seek to advance the group's power within institutional and legal frameworks, using rules and regimes as instruments of rivalry and advantage. Those low in TASK stress solidarity and loyalty, foregrounding ceremonial affirmation of the in-group and status cultivation within alliances. Finally, when both in-group bias and distrust are high, leaders embrace a starkly adversarial worldview, in which global politics is framed as a moralised struggle against implacable foes. With high Task Focus, this generates an uncompromising, mission-driven style of leadership that sets concrete goals for confrontation and accepts risk in pursuit of them. With low TASK, the same hostility is channelled into relationship terms. The emphasis falls on honour and cohesion, producing confrontational strategies justified as moral commitments to the group's integrity and survival.

| | | Distrust of Others (DIS) | |
		Low	High
Ingroup Bias (IGB)	**Low**	**Worldview:** World seen as non-threatening. Conflicts are situational; cooperation and flexibility are valued. **High TASK:** Pragmatic entrepreneurs who use cooperation to advance concrete agendas and solve problems. **Low TASK:** Prestige and recognition-seekers who treat cooperation as a stage for reassurance and loyalty.	**Worldview:** World seen as conflict-prone. Adversaries exist but are not implacable; vigilance is required. **High TASK:** Technocratic problem-solvers who invest in intelligence and monitoring to manage threats. **Low TASK:** Cautious relational managers who rely on selective partnerships and trust-building to offset risks.
	High	**Worldview:** System seen as zero-sum but bound by norms. Competition is accepted, threats managed within frameworks. **High Task:** Institutional competitors who exploit rules, institutions, and legal regimes to enhance group power. **Low Task:** Status cultivators who stress solidarity, prestige, and ceremonial affirmation of the in-group.	**Worldview:** World defined by hostile adversaries, framed as moralised, zero-sum struggle. **High Task:** Mission-driven confrontational leaders who set concrete objectives against enemies and accept risk. **Low Task:** Honour-bound mobilisers who rally followers through loyalty and moral commitment, sustaining cohesion in adversarial confrontation.

Table 5: Conceptualisation of the World

4. Final Typology

Importantly, these three combinations––Response to Constraints (BACE × PWR), Openness to Information (CC × SC) and Motivation (IGB x DIS x TASK)––then overlay one another, determining an overarching characterisation of leaders, as outlined in table 6.

Data

The quantitative component of this paper takes the form of a meta-analysis, predominantly anchored in the dataset produced by Çuhadar et al. (2021). With over half a million data points, this corpus provides exceptionally robust measures for Özal,

Responsiveness to Constraints (BACE/PWR)	Openness to Information (SC/CC)	Motivation (TASK/IGB/DIS)	
		Problem focus	**Relationship focus**
Challenges constraints	**Closed to information**	*Expansionistic – priority placed on enlarging the sphere of control of the leader, government, or state*	*Evangelistic – priority placed on persuading others to adopt the leader's mission and rallying supporters around a central cause*
Challenges constraints	**Open to information**	*Actively independent – priority placed on safeguarding room for manoeuvre and flexibility in a world perceived as restrictive*	*Directive – priority placed on preserving reputation and legitimacy on the world stage through visible engagement*
Respects constraints	**Closed to information**	*Incremental – priority placed on step-by-step gains in security or economy, carefully working around obstacles*	*Influential – priority placed on elevating status and recognition by cooperating with others in ways that enhance prestige*
Respects constraints	**Open to information**	*Opportunistic – priority placed on weighing what can realistically be achieved given the context and the demands of key constituencies*	*Collegial – priority placed on consensus-building, reconciling differences, and sharing responsibility with partners*

Table 6: Final Classification

Erbakan and Ecevit. Yet, like Görener and Ucal (2011) and Kesgin (2020), it does not extend into the later years of Erdoğan's two-decade rule, making primary analysis a necessity. The analysis of this period is particularly valuable, given the intensified engagement of Turkey on the global stage and the specific 'neo-Ottoman' contours of it, especially after the coup and the subsequent transition to a presidential system.

Validity

Though there might be intuitive apprehensions about an analytical model which relies absolutely on the words of politicians, LTA stands on a mountain of empirical analysis attesting to its methodological cogency (Yang, 2010). The complete automation of the coding process is a substantial part of this, essentially eradicating all intercoder reliability issues (Preston, 2001). Further, the 'at-a-distance' construction of LTA, focusing on the frequency and type of words used by individuals, rather than rhetoric of political statements negates potential deception. The framework's resistance to translation issues have also been empirically verified (Hermann, 2005). Nevertheless, a valid issue is the question of authorship. After all, much of the public statements attributed to leaders are heavily directed by political personnel. This does not pose a debilitating blow to the analysis that will follow, however, as the data utilised are predominantly drawn from 'natural' settings like interviews, where speech of leaders are overwhelmingly organic (Çuhadar et al., 2021).

Still, there is a pressing conceptual concern that has been levelled against LTA—one that calls for revisiting its origins. The psychological turn in foreign policy analysis began as a corrective to realism's mechanistic assumptions, which treated states as uniform 'black boxes' mechanically responding to systemic pressures. Psychology shifted the lens, insisting that decision-makers are individuals whose personalities colour geopolitical behaviour. LTA arose from the effort to pin down these qualitative traits, to make them measurable and usable in systematic modelling. Yet, within this very construction lies the persistent critique. In seeking to codify cognition, LTA can itself take on a mechanised quality. Crucially, to assuage this, the numerical indicators will be tested against the historical record, referenced directly to geopolitical events and the ways in which they were approached in practice.

Of course, alternative approaches do offer more qualitative ways of examining psychology, whether through heuristic analysis or semiotic readings of political discourse. Ideally, a more comprehensive account of cognition would integrate such perspectives, situating them alongside structural, international, and domestic analyses

across time. Yet the scope of this paper does not permit such an expansive undertaking. For present purposes, LTA offers a convenient and measurable tool for assessing cognitive characteristics, allowing for a longitudinal perspective that would otherwise be unfeasible outside of a book-length study.

Application and Analysis

Inception of Neo-Ottomanism (1989-1997)

<u>Structural Analysis</u>

In the sense of fundamentally shifting power dynamics, the end of the Cold War was a 'crisis' which greatly influenced the scope for FPC. The expansive reach of the Soviet Union had vanished, creating many structural opportunities to break with its Kemalist isolationism. Much of this arose from the countries going through the arduous process of state-building, with gross domestic product (GDP) nearly halving across the post-Soviet nations (Mitra and Solowsky, 2002). This vulnerability extended to its Middle Eastern competitors on its border with the halting of Soviet financial assistance and top-of-the-line military gear greatly contracting their coercive power (Makovsky, 1999). This vulnerability also extended to Turkey's Middle Eastern neighbours, whose coercive capacity was significantly reduced following the suspension of Soviet financial assistance and advanced military equipment (Makovsky, 1999). In contrast, Turkey boasted significant military strength across the 1990s. During a global period of declining military spending, it doubled its budget to nearly $7 billion (Makovsky, 1999). Further, it updated its archaic M-47 tanks, produced for the Korean War, as well as acquiring Cobra attack helicopters, top-of-the-line submarines and radar systems (Makovsky, 1999). Overall, this comparative strength afforded Turkey new opportunities for regional activism, yet these remained firmly circumscribed by its Western orientation. After all, the collapse of Soviet power confirmed the United States as the unchallenged global hegemon, making alignment with Washington not only attractive but effectively unavoidable, as the costs of deviation from the Western bloc outweighed the potential gains of independent manoeuvre. At the same time, Turkey's capacity was severely constrained by its troubled economy throughout the 1990s, marked by persistent current account deficits and an average inflation rate of 76 percent (Görmez and Yigit, 2009).

Domestically, this opening remained narrow for both Özal and Erbakan, with the most significant constraint emanating from the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK). Individuals vying for change during this time had to consider the existential complications of pushing the military to its limits. Not only was there historical precedent for a military takeover, seen across the coups in 1960, 1971 and 1980, the TSK's right to do so was constitutionally codified under Article 35 of the Internal Service Act (Zürcher, 2004). The military junta of 1971 also granted the army considerable influence over budget allocation and policy formulation, legislating itself to be completely independent from the Ministry of Defence and thereby insulating itself from government influence (Karaosmanoglu, 2000). Further, the TSK also had an institutionalised position in foreign policy through the National Security Council (NSC) (Sakallioglu, 1997). Civilian representation within the ultimate decision-making authority was limited to the Prime

Table 6: Final Classification

Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, and the President—the latter holding only a formal chairmanship (Çakır, 2014). To make matters worse, both Özal and Erbakan headed coalition governments, meaning that the civilian decision-makers alongside them were leaders of other parties. This proved especially constraining for Erbakan, whose President and Deputy Prime Minister were staunchly pro-Western, secular figures (Çakır, 2014). Electoral fragmentation further strengthened the parliament's constraining role, a challenge felt most acutely by Özal, given that his foreign policy dealt with international conflict. Indeed, he was significantly limited by Article 92 of the constitution, enshrining an explicit requirement of parliamentary authorisation for any armed deployment abroad (Hale, 2016). All in all, both the parliament and the military were fervently opposed to direct involvement in Iraq and Nagorno-Karabakh, not to mention Erbakan's 'Islamic NATO' proposals (Çakır, 2014). To sum up, although the international environment offered certain favourable dynamics—albeit largely within a Western orientation—the formidable domestic constraints overwhelmingly curtailed the scope for meaningful foreign policy change.

<u>Psychological Analysis</u>

Despite these odds, Özal was able to extract a deviation from Kemalist isolationism, albeit at a minimal magnitude, whilst Erbakan left office empty-handed, having been ushered out with a 'bloodless coup' (Taspinar, 2007). In these near-identical structural contexts, the disparity can be traced to their contrasting psychological profiles. The roots of Erbakan's failure lay in the interaction of his motivational traits. His distrust of others (DIS .144) was slightly above the world leader norm (.130), while his in-group bias (IGB .135) was noticeably higher than Özal's (.116). Taken together, this combination generated an adversarial worldview in which politics appeared as a moralised struggle pitting his Islamic community against the ontologically 'evil' forces of the military and the West (Çuhadar et al., 2021). Compounding this, his task orientation (TASK .537) was well below the mean (.630), meaning that he filtered this adversarial stance through a relationship-maintenance lens. Rather than pursuing pragmatic problem-solving, he sought loyalty, affirmation, and group solidarity, reinforcing the dichotomous framing of politics and limiting his capacity for cooperative interaction — which, given the structural context, was arguably essential for foreign policy change.

Other traits deepened this rigidity. His need for power (PWR .278) exceeded the norm (.260), but his belief in ability to control events (BACE .340) fell just below average (.350). This left him desiring authority but doubting his efficacy. Rather than engaging directly with the military or carefully manoeuvring through parliament, this configuration encouraged an indirect form of constraint challenging. Erbakan pressed against structures obliquely, through sweeping ideological initiatives and rhetorical defiance. The D-8 project and his pan-Islamic appeals embodied this style: bold in symbolism but lacking the institutional levers to reshape outcomes. His conceptual complexity (CC .529) and self-confidence (SC .317) were both below norms (.590 and .360), coding him as closed to information and unable to heed the 'red lines' repeatedly articulated by the military. This profile aligns with the Evangelistic style which, predictably, maps onto the historical record. Despite repeated warnings from the TSK that Islamic reform or confrontation with the West would not be tolerated, Erbakan pressed ahead and ultimately faced the consequences of a 'modern coup' (Çakir, 2014).

By contrast, Özal's motivational configuration was markedly different. His distrust (DIS .134) was close to the norm (.130), while his in-group bias (IGB .116) was lower than Erbakan's, making him less susceptible to rigid 'good versus evil' frames and more open to pluralist readings of politics. Crucially, his task orientation (TASK .656) was above the mean (.630), enabling him to operationalise this relatively balanced worldview through a problem-solving style. Instead of framing politics in terms of loyalty and solidarity, he treated it as a field of pragmatic opportunities. This was reinforced by complementary dispositional traits: his need for power (PWR .229) was below the norm (.260), but his belief in control (BACE .371) exceeded it (.350), producing a leader confident in steering outcomes without being driven by raw ambition. This configuration inclined him to challenge constraints in a relatively direct manner — willing to press his case openly in institutional arenas — though tempered by a pragmatism that prevented overreach. Combined with very high conceptual complexity (CC .651) and above-average self-confidence (SC .453), Özal was coded as open to information: receptive and tactically flexible. This profile aligns with the Actively Independent style. This allowed him to channel distrust into pragmatic measures rather than ideological crusades. He persuaded the military on Iraqi sanctions by cutting budgets and applying measured pressure in the NSC, and secured backing from his Prime Minister and deputy despite their doubts (Çuhadar et al., 2021; Çakir, 2014). As an effective entrepreneur, he recognised limits, shelving plans for Iraqi intervention once resistance hardened, thereby maximising the potential for incremental foreign policy change (Hale, 2016).

Leader	Responsiveness to Constraints (BACE × PWR)	Openness to Information (CC × SC)	Motivation (IGB × DIS)	Classification
Özal	Direct Challenger (BACE .371↑ / PWR .229↓)	Open to Information (CC .651↑ > SC .453↑)	Problem-focused (Pragmatic) (IGB .116↓ / DIS .134≈ / TASK .656↑)	Actively Independent – pragmatic, flexible
Erbakan	Indirect Challenger (BACE .340≈ / PWR .278↑)	Closed to Information (CC . 529↓ / SC .317↓)	Relationship-focused (Maintenance) (IGB .135↑ / DIS .144↑/ TASK .537↓)	Evangelistic – ideological, identity-centred

Table 7: LTA Scores – Özal vs Erbakan

Decline of Neo-Ottomanism (1997-2007)

Structural Analysis

Turning to the period of 'neo-Ottoman' decline, the principal international factor shaping both change and continuity was the resolution of post–Cold War balancing dynamics. By the turn of the century, the post-Soviet states had largely stabilised, narrowing Turkey's international room for manoeuvre and constraining its scope for independent policy-making (Çakır, 2014). This regional recovery coincided with a decline in Turkey's own economic and military capacity, undercutting its ambitions to assume a neo-Ottoman 'big brother' role. The Ecevit government, in particular, was in no position to pursue an active foreign policy, having been battered by twin credit crises in 1997 and 2001 and a devastating earthquake in 1999, which inflicted an estimated $4.5 billion in damage (Bibbee et al., 2000). Rehabilitation was made possible only through Western financial assistance, most notably IMF loans of $11.4 billion and EU contributions of €450 million, further deepening Turkey's dependence on the West (Ural, 2016). Although the AKP later restored economic stability through stringent fiscal discipline, this recovery came at the expense of military capacity, with the army reduced by almost 20 percent (World Bank, 2019). In parallel, Turkey's alignment with the West persisted, reinforced by the continued dominance of the United States. Strategically, Ankara facilitated American objectives in the Middle East, while Washington reciprocated by supporting Turkey's

stance on the 'Kurdish problem'—a relationship crystallised in the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 (Weiner, 1999).

Contrastingly, there was a distinct change in the EU's stance towards Turkey during this period. Again, related to the relative stabilisation of post-Soviet states, the Central and Eastern European countries constituting this pack were seen to be a better fit for integration, given their historical, sociocultural and geographic ties to the continent, pushing Turkey down the pecking order (Çakir, 2014). These states—collectively branded the 'A-10' countries—were granted official candidacy at the 1997 Luxembourg summit, while Turkey's own application was rejected and only later accepted under heavily conditional terms in 1999 (Pieters, 2021). Although the accession process initially moved forward with some momentum, full membership negotiations did not open until 2005 and quickly lost traction, whereas the 'A-10' states had already achieved full integration by 2004 (Pieters, 2021). Though these consecutive, humiliating rejections may have reasonably catalysed a move away from the EU, neither Ecevit nor Erdoğan had the power to take such a leap in this timeframe. Besides the dependencies outlined above, Turkey was now a part of the European Common Market, with the union making up 60 percent of its trades (Allesandri, 2010)

These international constraints on individuals were further layered domestically, with the power of the army not experiencing a substantial change. In fact, in response to the rekindled insurgency of the PKK in 1996, its involvement was on the rise (Çakir, 2014). More prominently, the 'modern coup' that had ousted Erbakan in 1997 demonstrated to leaders that the iron-clad grip the TSK still had over Turkish politics, despite the reluctance of the parliament in conforming to its agenda (Çakir, 2014). Interestingly, the military continued to enjoy broad popular support, with polls indicating nearly 80 percent approval compared to just 21 percent for politicians (Mohammed, 2014). Nonetheless, the Copenhagen Criteria attached to the EU accession process, which required curbing military oversight, posed the first real challenge to its dominance (Emerson, 2004). A pivotal reform was the 2003 amendment to the Law on Public Financial Management, which progressively diluted the martial presence within the National Security Council (NSC) by introducing civilian members (Çakır, 2014). The same legislation also curtailed the NSC's financial autonomy, placing its expenditures under parliamentary scrutiny (Çakır, 2014). While significant, these changes fell short of fundamentally altering the military's de facto power.

Electoral dynamics further shaped the scope of leadership agency. The Ecevit government, hamstrung by the constraints of a tripartite coalition, had little capacity to pursue transformative policies (Çakır, 2014). By contrast, Erdoğan's AKP entered office with a commanding majority, securing 363 parliamentary seats—more than double the threshold for a single-party government (Carroll, 2004). Thus, while both Ecevit and Erdoğan faced structural limits, they were constrained to very different degrees, particularly in terms of their political authority.

Psychological Analysis

Still, the domineering structures did not completely cripple the agency of these individuals, with both Ecevit and Erdoğan exhibiting degrees of defiance consistent

with their LTA profiles. The clearest instance of Ecevit's defiance was his threat to sever relations with the EU following the Helsinki decision in 1999 (Çuhadar et al., 2021). He also pushed back against the US Senate's Armenian Genocide resolution, demonstrating a readiness to challenge entrenched expectations when supported by his coalition (Çuhadar et al., 2021). Ecevit's political aptitude stemmed less from raw belief in control and more from his openness to information, reflected in his conceptual complexity (CC .617) and self-confidence (SC .505), both above the LTA norms (.590 and .360) (Çuhadar et al., 2021). This configuration codes him as open to information — perceptive, attentive to multiple perspectives, and capable of identifying 'windows of opportunity' in foreign affairs. His task orientation (TASK .664), likewise above the mean (.630), anchored this openness in a problem-solving orientation rather than relationship-maintenance.

Yet motivation in LTA also depends on in-group bias and distrust. Ecevit's in-group bias (IGB .143) was just below the average (.150) but still higher than Erdoğan's (IGB .101), reinforcing his attachment to the secular-Kemalist in-group. His distrust (DIS .090), significantly below the norm (.130), meant that he did not view the international environment as inherently threatening, but he did maintain a somewhat contentious posture towards Islamists and sometimes the West. Taken together, his motivational configuration — low distrust, moderately high in-group bias, and high task orientation — produced a worldview that was competitive but not conspiratorial, channelled through pragmatic problem-solving. Overall, this roughly maps onto the Actively Independent style: challenging constraints, open to information, and problem-focused. Still, his belief in ability to control events (BACE .320) was below the norm (.350), and his need for power (PWR .257) about average (.260), which meant his approach towards structures was marginal and indirect, and was contingent on coalition backing rather than unilateral assertion. Thus, his Actively Independent style manifested less as bold autonomy and more as flexible manoeuvring within coalitions.

Erdoğan's psychological configuration produced a different variant of independence. His belief in ability to control events (BACE .345) sat just below the norm (.350), while his need for power (PWR .271) was slightly above it (.260). This combination positioned him as an Indirect Challenger: willing to contest constraints, but inclined to do so behind the scenes, relying on strategic manoeuvres and proxies rather than constant open confrontation. His conceptual complexity (CC .592) was just above the norm (.590), while his self-confidence (SC .349) remained just under it (.360). This balance coded him as open to information — receptive to multiple perspectives, even if not especially assertive in imposing his own judgements. His task orientation (TASK .633) was essentially at the mean (.630), situating him firmly in the problem-focused camp rather than the relationship-focused one.

Where Erdoğan diverged most sharply from Erbakan was in his motivational base. His in-group bias (IGB .101) and distrust (DIS .110) were both below norms (.150 and .130), giving him a worldview neither tightly bound to a particular in-group identity nor predisposed to see adversaries everywhere (Çuhadar et al., 2021). Coupled with a problem-solving Task orientation, this produced a pragmatic independence, far less moralised than Erbakan's. It helps explain why, in his early years, Erdoğan embraced EU accession — a move that weakened the military under the cover of democratisation

(Rogenhofer, 2018). His motivational profile allowed him to cloak defiance in pragmatism. This was also evident during the 2003 Iraq War, when he orchestrated an en bloc AKP vote and deployed threats to secure discipline (Çuhadar et al., 2021). At times, his assertiveness misfired — as in his failed effort to overturn the headscarf ban — but his Indirect Challenger style, defined by low distrust, low in-group bias, and problem orientation, gave him the flexibility to contest entrenched structures subtly, using coalition politics, EU leverage, and tactical ambiguity. In this sense, he was able to test limits without provoking outright rupture, which explains why a fully fledged 'neo-Ottoman' turn had yet to materialise.

Leader	Responsiveness to Constraints (BACE × PWR)	Openness to Information (CC × SC)	Motivation (IGB × DIS)	Classification
Ecevit	Coalition-Based Indirect Challenger (BACE .320↓ / PWR .257≈)	Open to Information (CC .617↑ / SC .505↑)	Problem-focused (IGB .143≈ / DIS .090↓ / TASK .664↑)	Actively Independent – perceptive, pragmatic, but coalition-dependent
Erdoğan	Indirect Challenger (BACE .345≈ / PWR .271↑)	Open to Information (CC .592≈ > SC .349≈)	Problem-focused (IGB .101↓ / DIS .110↓ / TASK .633≈)	Actively Independent – pragmatic, flexible, receptive.

Table 8: LTA Scores – Ecevit vs Erdoğan

Rise of Neo-Ottomanism (2007-2020)

Structural Analysis

Finally turning to the rise of neo-Ottomanism under the second AKP rule, the international setting in which this shift occurred was arguably the most turbulent it had been since the end of the Cold War. Indeed, the increasingly multipolar nature of geopolitics, combined with the numerous conflicts arising in its neighbourhood, created many opportunities that Erdoğan had to react to. Fundamentally, the Arab Spring created a window for Turkey to project its influence on states under reconstruction, much like the end of the Cold War (Neset et al., 2021). However, this era differed in the prominence of other regional powers. For example, the Saudi coalition, joined by Bahrain and Egypt, contested Turkey across the East Mediterranean, North Africa and the Gulf, whilst the 'Shia Crescent', powered by Iran, did so throughout the Middle East (Neset et al., 2021). Still, Turkey developed a powerful defence industry in this period, exporting an impressive $1.6 billion in 2014 (Bakeer, 2019). Further, unlike the rest of the region, it left the 2008 crisis relatively unscathed, with a mere 4.6 percent contraction in 2009 followed by an impressive 8.8 percent growth in 2010 (Jarosiewicz, 2013).

This era of multipolarity also incentivised Turkey to greatly diversify its economic relations. Primarily, a significant economic relationship was developed with China, actively partaking in its Belt and Road initiative and the value of their bilateral trade doubling during this timeframe (Ding, Ning and Zang, 2018). Coupled with this, the utility provided by the 'strategic relationship' between Turkey and the US declined. The US began shifting its focus towards Romania and Bulgaria in acting as channels into the Black Sea, for example, as well as diverting some of its air force concentration from Turkey to Greece (Neset et al., 2021). Interests have collided most substantially over Syria, with the American assistance of Kurdish paramilitaries seen to directly boost the strength of Turkey's most potent threat to its national security. As such, Erdoğan re-orientated and found an unlikely ally in Russia, creating an uptick in relations. Economically, the country rapidly became Turkey's third largest trading partner in 2015,

behind China and Germany (World Bank, 2015). Besides economic ties, this relationship controversially led to Turkey adopting the Russian S-400s, following the Americans withdrawing their Patriot defence systems in 2015. In retaliation, based on American anxieties about Russian surveillance of its F-35s, the jet fighters were withdrawn and sanctions applied on its defence industry (Yegin, 2019). Likewise, relations with the EU have soured amidst increasing human rights concerns, with integration talks being shelved for good following the post-coup authoritarian decline (Çakir, 2014).

Despite these shifts in relations, enduring structural constraints have prevented a full-scale reorientation. Above all, even within an increasingly multipolar environment, the United States remains the pre-eminent global power by every conceivable metric, from military expenditure to the global reach of its bases. Turkey's reliance on the European Union also persists, most visibly in the management of the refugee crisis, while Germany and the United States continue to rank among its most significant trading partners (Altay, 2018). Moreover, although the Turkish economy performed relatively well throughout the 2010s, the following decade has been marked by acute turbulence, with successive currency and inflation crises undermining Ankara's international leverage (Aytaç, 2021).

Paralleling the changes internationally, there were seismic structural shifts in the domestic context, especially with regards to the military. The first visible cracks in its power were seen in 2007, when the military released an online memorandum threateningly protesting Erdoğan's Presidential nomination, Abdullah Gül, on grounds of his Islamic ideologies (Bardakçi, 2013). The military also objected to AKP's proposed electoral reforms and their increasingly religion infused politics, calling on the Turkish Constitutional Court to banish the party. This materialised to be a feeble attempt, with the courts deeming that AKP did not pose a fundamental threat to the republic's secular architecture (Lenore, 2008). On the back of this, the party won the 2007 election with another comfortable majority, Erdoğan continuing as Prime Minister and Gül as the new President. The prestige of the military took another mighty blow in 2010 when a document dating back to 2003 was leaked, supposedly outlining an intricate plot against the newly elected AKP (Rodrik, 2011). Operation Sledgehammer, as branded by the military, allegedly planned the bombing of two mosques in Istanbul and the downing of a Turkish aircraft over the Aegean—acts to be blamed on Greece to justify the declaration of a state of emergency and a subsequent military coup (Rodrik, 2011). This scandal sent the TSK into disarray, with 300 of its senior command being sentenced to prison (BBC, 2011). The public opinion plummeted accordingly, by around a factor of 30 percent (Mohammed, 2014).

This crisis was followed by another successful constitutional referendum in 2010, which removed the political immunity of the military and gave the right for the president to appoint almost the entirety of the Constitutional Court (Herzog, 2010). The biggest overhaul of domestic constraints, however, came following the coup in 2016 (Neset et al., 2019). Utilising the state of emergency, the military was cleansed by the thousands, with Erdoğan placing himself as the army's Commander-in-Chief (Neset et al., 2019). More importantly, the state of emergency was used to push through a constitutional referendum on a presidential system in 2017. Though this passed marginally and under much controversy, it radically weakened parliamentary power, granting a

potent executive, legislative and judicial power to the President (Tas, 2015). This has naturally transposed onto the foreign policy decision-making process, which has been monopolised within the presidency. Indeed, with no legal framework or harmonisation laws present, most geopolitical decisions are now made exclusively through Presidential Decrees (Neset et al., 2019).

Psychological Analysis

In Erdoğan's second term, the easing of these domestic and international constraints allowed his psychological profile to manifest with greater force. His belief in control (BACE .435 vs .345) rose above its earlier level, while his need for power (PWR .280 vs .271) also edged upward. Taken together, this growing self-assurance encouraged him to move beyond accommodation and to experiment with strategies aimed at reshaping the political environment. Whereas in his first term he challenged constraints largely through indirect means, cloaking defiance in pragmatism, by his second term the convergence of higher efficacy and power motivation made him an optimised challenger — one capable of deploying both direct and indirect approaches as circumstances required, choosing the method that best secured his policy goals. His self-confidence (SC .500 vs .349) also rose significantly, while conceptual complexity (CC .497 vs .592) fell well below it, re-coding him as closed to information. This meant that his growing sense of assurance was now accompanied by a diminished receptiveness to competing perspectives, narrowing the range of inputs he was willing to entertain. The motivational profile reinforced this turn. Both in-group bias (IGB .160 vs .101) and distrust (DIS .170 vs .110) climbed, with IGB now above the global mean (.150). This gave him a more adversarial and identity-centred worldview, increasingly framed in Manichean terms.

Operationally, Erdoğan's TASK score, though slightly lower than in his first term (.624 vs .633), remained around the mean (.630), keeping him problem-focused. With stronger efficacy, higher confidence, and an uptick in power motivation, this configuration converged into an Expansionistic style. Adversaries were recast as obstacles to be actively confronted, opportunities as challenges to be seized. The 2008 constitutional ruling, which secured his party's survival, marked this inflection. Initially, he relied on indirect strategies, such as aligning with the Gülen movement to delegitimise the military. But as his adversarial worldview hardened and his confidence grew, he increasingly employed direct strategies, dismantling the Gülenists and the military's political role outright to centralise authority.

Comparing the two terms highlights the evolution. In his first, his psychological configuration produced a pragmatic worldview channelled into indirect, problem-focused independence — exemplified in his embrace of EU accession as a means to weaken the military under the cover of democratisation. By the second, rising PWR, elevated BACE, and stronger SC combined with heightened IGB to produce a more identity-centred, mission-driven posture, enacted through optimised indirect and direct confrontation. This transformation illustrates a reciprocal relationship between structure and personality. Loosening constraints gave Erdoğan greater latitude to act on his evolving psychological configuration, with the same configuration playing a role in eroding those very constraints. In this sense, structural openings and personal dispositions reinforced one another. As constraints receded, his traits came to the fore,

and as those traits shaped bold actions, they further weakened the very institutions that had once checked him.

Leader	Responsiveness to Constraints (BACE × PWR)	Openness to Information (CC × SC)	Motivation (IGB × DIS)	Classification
Erdoğan (2002-2007)	Indirect Challenger (BACE .345≈ / PWR .271↑)	Open to Information (CC .592≈ > SC .349≈)	Problem-focused (IGB .101↓ / DIS .110↓/ TASK .633≈)	Actively Independent – pragmatic, flexible, receptive.
Erdoğan (2007-2020)	Optimum Challenger (BACE .435↑ / PWR .280↑)	Closed to Information (CC .497↓ < SC .500↑)	Problem-focused (IGB .160↑ / DIS .170↑ / TASK .624≈)	Expansionistic – assertive, identity-centred, focused on enlarging control

Table 9: Erdoğan (2002-2007) & Erdoğan (2007-2020)

Discussion

What this analysis primarily shows is that FPC is an incredibly demanding geopolitical phenomenon. It entails not only the correct international and domestic context creating a pathway for change, but also the presence of policy entrepreneurs able to capitalise on, or actively shape, these structural openings. In short, AKP's neo-Ottoman shift was determined by this perfect convergence. In earlier phases, either domestic or international factors, or both, heavily restricted the scope for FPC — though leaders still attempted change with varying degrees of success. Interestingly, all the leaders considered in the analysis fit the requirement of a 'policy entrepreneur'. Of course, as outlined, the expected 'policy entrepreneur' must not only challenge structures but do so effectively, as well as holding a 'neo-Ottoman' philosophy. Erbakan epitomises the limits of zeal without efficacy. Despite his fervent ideological commitment, his below average BACE (.340) and moderately high PWR (.278) curtailed his ability to steer outcomes directly. Instead, this configuration encouraged a more indirect mode of constraint challenging — pressing against entrenched structures through sweeping ideological gestures rather than through direct institutional manoeuvring. Crucially, his low self-confidence and subpar complexity compounded the problem, leaving him rigid and poorly attuned to subtle openings. So, his orientation made him willing but ill-equipped to challenge structures, which helps explain the brevity of his evangelistic tenure. Lacking the dexterity to turn openings into gains, his ineptitude emboldened the military and the secular elite – hardening the very barriers he sought to break.

Ecevit, conversely, possessed traits that made him adept at navigating constraints but without the ideological ambition to drive a neo-Ottoman turn. His conceptual complexity (CC .617) and self-confidence (SC .505) were both above normal, marking him as open to information and receptive to multiple perspectives. Coupled with a strong task focus (TASK .664), he displayed a problem-solving style that allowed him to push EU relations in actionable directions after Helsinki. Yet, his weak efficacy beliefs (BACE .320) limited his capacity to drive change independently, leaving him reliant on coalition consensus. Here, personality again interacted with structure in a mutually reinforcing way. Ecevit's pragmatism allowed adaptation within constraints, yet his modest sense of agency meant those constraints were rarely weakened. In any case, lacking a neo-Ottoman worldview, his policy innovations remained tethered to secular-Kemalist objectives, rather than any fundamental revisionism.

This leaves Özal and Erdoğan as the leaders most capable of marrying aptitude and

vision, which corresponds to the historical record. Özal's cognitive configuration exhibits a high BACE (.371) and moderately low PWR (.229), equipping him to press against structures directly, while his above-average SC (.453) and very high CC (.651) coded him as receptive to competing perspectives. His distrust (DIS .134) sat close to the global mean, cautious but not conspiratorial, while his in-group bias (IGB .116) reinforced a pluralist orientation. Crucially, his TASK (.656) was above the mean (.630), situating him firmly in the problem-focused camp and allowing him to channel this pluralist worldview into pragmatic, opportunity-seeking strategies. Yet, structurally, he faced severe political and economic constraints. But here, again, reciprocity is present. Yes, Özal's personality profile may have helped him adapt to those constraints but, at the same time, it defined them by limiting how far he could or would push back. The outcome was a liberal, Europe-compatible version of neo-Ottomanism that resonated but did not translate into any radical transformation.

Erdoğan's trajectory, by comparative design, is more dynamic. In his first term (2002–2007), his BACE (.345) was around the mean, SC (.349) below norm, and CC (.592) slightly above. Combined with low IGB (.101) and DIS (.110), this placed him in the category of leaders open to information, more pragmatic than ideological. His traits both adapted to and subtly reshaped constraints, providing the tools to weaken structural barriers – illustrated aptly in his EU accession strategy. By his second term (2007–2020), both Erdoğan's profile and the structural environment had shifted. His belief in control (BACE .435) climbed higher while his need for power (PWR .280) crept above the mean, improving him from an indirect challenger into a more optimised one — capable of pressing against structures with both direct and indirect strategies. At the same time, his self-confidence (SC .500) rose above the mean, while his conceptual complexity (CC .497) fell below it, producing closure to information: a greater certainty in his own judgement, but less receptiveness to competing perspectives. His in-group bias (IGB .160) and distrust (DIS .170) also increased, reinforcing an adversarial and identity-driven worldview. Finally, his task orientation (TASK .624) stayed close to the mean (.630), sufficient to channel this outlook into problem-focused execution. This new configuration encouraged more assertive and identity-centred policies, reflected in AKP's drive for regional autonomy and a readiness to confront the West more directly.

Of course, these changes cannot be purely read as simple personal evolution. Far from operating in a vacuum, these traits became pertinent because of various international developments, not to mention the fact that the military's political weight had already been undermined. In this sense, the differences in Özal's and Erdoğan's foreign policy outcomes are at least partly attributable to the constraints. Özal's opportunity, created by the end of the Cold War, was tempered by a fractious coalition and the enduring power of the military. Erdoğan, meanwhile, benefitted from a parliamentary majority, reduced dependence on the West, and a weakened military establishment. Yet, it would be misleading to suggest that this change was likewise solely structural. After all, Erdoğan's tactical use of power was central to gaining popular support and weakening constraining structures. By exploiting alliances—most notably with the Gülen movement—and later dismantling them, whilst simultaneously pushing legal mechanisms against entrenched elites and democratic institutions, he indeed directly facilitated the erosion of almost all inhibitive authority.

From this perspective, Erbakan's failure and Erdoğan's eventual success represent two ends of a spectrum, defined certainly by structural openings but also by how personality traits shape, and are shaped by, those openings. Erbakan's weak efficacy left him reinforcing the very barriers he sought to dismantle, Erdoğan's rising confidence and tactical assertiveness actively undercut them. Özal illustrates how cosmopolitan traits could adapt to but not overturn constraints, while Ecevit shows how openness and pragmatism may facilitate adaptation without transformation. Yet, the key point here is not to draw a deterministic causal chain. Personality did not predetermine foreign policy outcomes, nor did structure alone dictate behaviour. Instead, leadership traits and the permissive environment interacted recursively. Erdoğan's early pragmatism and dexterity were mutually shaped by structural openings, just as his growing confidence both enabled and was enabled by the weakening of institutional constraints. As those constraints receded, his worldview gained greater traction — not as an inevitable progression, but as the product of this continual interplay.

	Responsiveness to Constraints	Openness to Information	Worldview	Operationalised Worldview	Overall Typology
Erbakan	Indirect Challenger (BACE .340≈ / PWR .278↑)	Closed (CC .529 ↓ / SC .317 ↓)	Manichean (IGB .135↑ / DIS .144↑)	Relationship-Focused (TASK .537↓)	Evangelistic – moral absolutist, adversarial worldview
Özal	Constraint Challenger (BACE .371↑ / PWR .229↓)	Open (CC .651↑ > SC .453↑)	Competitive (IGB .116↓ / DIS .134≈)	Problem-Focused (TASK .656↑)	Actively Independent – entrepreneurial, opportunistic, pragmatic
Ecevit	Constraint Challenger (BACE .320↓ / PWR .257≈)	Open (CC .617↑ > SC .505↑)	Cooperative (IGB .143≈ / DIS .090↓)	Problem-Focused (TASK .664↑)	Actively Independent – adaptive within coalitions, secular-Kemalist aims
Erdoğan (2002-2007)	Constraint Challenger (BACE .345≈ / PWR .271↑)	Open (CC .592≈ > SC .349≈)	Cooperative (IGB .101↓ / DIS .110↓)	Problem-Focused (TASK .633≈)	Actively Independent – pragmatic, used EU process tactically
Erdoğan (2007-2020)	Constraint Challenger (BACE .435↑ / PWR .280↑)	Closed (CC .497↓ < SC .500↑)	Manichean (IGB .160↑ / DIS .170↑)	Problem-Focused (TASK .624≈)	Expansionist – confrontational, identity-centred executor

Table 10 : LTA Results Summary

Conclusion

This study has sought to show the structure–agency dynamics which have shaped Turkey's striking geopolitical reorientation. In doing so, Gustavsson's (1999) FPC model has been revised, specifically by incorporating LTA into its otherwise ordinary conceptualisation of the individual and situating this alongside cyclical and structural models. With this, it has moved into the cognitive 'black box' of four Turkish leaders, examining how they were constrained and how they interacted with international and domestic confines. Özal's agility in exploiting the post-Cold War 'window of opportunity' was shown, demonstrating his navigation of the economic, parliamentary and military restraints he encountered. Resultantly, the paper suggested how he articulated the Ottomans as a more Western-oriented, cosmopolitan empire. Erbakan's clumsy attempts at Islamic reformation were seen as a further contrast to Özal's relative dexterity, highlighting the significance of political aptitude when pursuing FPC – especially when confronting the entrenched power of the Turkish military. The era following this transient inception of 'neo-Ottomanism' offered little structural scope for deviation, and Ecevit's republican commitments made him an unlikely candidate for pursuing such a course.

Structural constraints were equally important in tempering Erdoğan's first term, limiting the expression of his more ambitious impulses and presenting him instead as a democratic reformer. Even so, his implicit use of power in this era was pivotal in laying the groundwork for his eventual ascendance. By his second term, the configuration had shifted. With greater efficacy, rising confidence, and a stronger drive for power — now sharpened by in-group bias and closure to information — Erdoğan met a more permissive environment with bolder, more assertive strategies. Simultaneously enabled

by a multipolar geopolitical context and a weakened Kemalist military, he pushed through a more confrontational, identity-orientated vision that contrasted markedly with his measured first term.

So, in summary, the 'neo-Ottoman' shift was in many ways an alignment of the stars, a freak occurrence ensuring the temperate conditions for AKP's 'neo-Ottoman' shift. But, at the same time, it was a calculated act of a cunning 'policy entrepreneur', biding his time, chipping away at the foundations and pouncing at the opportune moment. As such, the thesis is in agreement with the literature that substantial FPC is an inordinately scarce phenomenon, though its study is as necessary as it is fascinating. Still, the paper proudly deviates from the scholarship's aversion towards the adequate consideration of human psychology in explaining change. In this sense, its biggest contribution is the construction of the LTA-FPC framework, which will prove applicable far and beyond the Turkish case. Specifically, it would be curious to see its application in other nations with prominent military institutions, Western dependencies and personalistic leaders creating comparable variables. In this regard, Brazil might be a potential candidate.

A further application would be longitudinal analysis. Leaders who remain in office for extended periods — and especially those who recalibrate their style — should be studied at intervals to capture changes in their psychological profile. Erdoğan offers a striking illustration, with measurable shifts across his terms underscoring how traits and strategies evolve over time. Finally, some refinements to the model are worth underscoring. Hermann (1990) long ago suggested that leaders may recalibrate their style depending on the audience, behaving one way at home and another abroad. This insight has been applied to Erdoğan, but remains largely neglected in other cases (Kesgin, 2020). Probing these divergences could open a promising line of inquiry, not only further illuminating the mechanics of the 'neo-Ottoman' shift but also sharpening the psychological model writ large.

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Green Governance: Unveiling Factors Influencing Environmental Policy in Developing Countries

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Abstract: *What are the factors that contribute to good green governance? While the literature provides answers for developed countries, including a strong institutional capacity or democratic development, these factors have not been thoroughly examined in the context of developing countries. This article aims to test the applicability of these factors to developing countries. The study finds that despite criticisms that Western-style good governance frameworks are not suitable for the developing world, the basic principles of these frameworks, such as the rule of law, civil society, lack of corruption, and a strong bureaucracy, are crucial for developing countries to enhance their institutional capacities and implement effective national environmental policies. The article theorizes that factors such as regime type and corruption significantly contribute to the quality of domestic environmental policies in developing nations. It applies regression analysis to assess the success of national environmental policies in developing countries on a large N and validates the argument by presenting two case studies, namely Chile and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The findings suggest that before implementing large-scale environmental projects, developing countries should prioritize enhancing their democratic institutions in ways both fundamental and suitable to their contexts, especially by reducing corruption, to achieve a positive impact.*

Increasing globalization and opportunities for economic development have continued to trigger environmental degradation around the globe. The intensification of human activities aimed at meeting various societal needs and desires (such as industrial growth, urbanization, energy production, transportation development, etc.) in recent years has been proven to induce the emissions of greenhouse gasses that "subsequently alter the atmosphere's radiative properties, resulting in warming of the atmosphere, ocean, and land components of the climate system."[1]

Despite countries undertaking significant efforts to tackle environmental problems by adopting specific solutions via international agreements (e.g. Paris Agreement), the risks of extreme events (such as floods, drought, heatwaves, and others) provoked by the insufficient domestic response to climate change continue to pose humanitarian emergencies and are "increasing in scale, frequency, and intensity."[2] Given that "3.6 billion people already live in areas highly susceptible to climate change" and the changing climate is "expected to cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year"[3] between 2030 and 2050, it is important to understand the ways in which individual countries can improve their domestic environmental policies to respond

more effectively to growing environmental degradation. Understanding the reasons behind the successes and failures of domestic environmental policies is the first step in understanding how to tackle the problem.

Many developed countries, especially with democratic contexts, aim to ensure transparent and efficient management of public affairs, which in turn encourages the adoption of effective domestic environmental policies that align with international standards.[4] Thus, stable institutional frameworks and sufficient administrative capacity at the local, regional, and national levels allow developed countries to find optimal ways to mitigate the implications of intense anthropogenic impact on the environment. To be sure, it does not exclude the fact that some developed countries are predominantly major contributors to environmental degradation due to their intense activities directed at improving citizens' quality of life.[5] This, however, means that they are capable of mitigating the adverse effects they pose because of their continued development in comparison to less developed countries (LDCs). On the other hand, many developing countries (e.g., Kazakhstan and others of the former Soviet bloc), have, in a similar vein, undertaken efforts to adopt environmental laws and create "formal governmental structures to address their serious environmental problems, but few have been successful in alleviating those problems."[6]

The question of why some developing countries have successfully implemented environmental policies while others have failed is the main focus of this paper. While the research about what determines the success of national environmental policies in high-income countries is extensive,[7] the need to understand the context of developing countries is still in demand because developing countries face unique challenges and contexts that impact the effectiveness of their environmental policies.[8] This paper aims to investigate the factors which contribute to the effectiveness of good green governance in developing countries. The research question is "what contributes to the (in)effectiveness of national environmental policies in developing countries?" While limited financial resources, competing development priorities, weak integration into the global market, and an unstable political landscape may contribute to the inefficiency of environmental regulations,[9] the main focus of the study is to determine the extent to which institutional weaknesses – such as corruption – and regime factor (or democratization level), can explain the success or failure of national environmental response in LDCs. To note, the literature defines control of corruption as a critical indicator of institutional capacity, which, in turn, is understood as the effective functioning of the state on a multidimensional scale (e.g., rule of law, public good provision, low corruption, etc.).[10] Thus, government effectiveness is associated with the ability of the state to control corruption levels[11] and is therefore treated as such in this paper.

These two factors can be revealing because (i) the transition to democracy is an unfinished process in the developing world which manifests, in part, as uneven institutional dynamics with implications for environmental strategies, and (ii) corruption, which, while intersecting with the notion of democracy, appears in all political systems and undermines responsible governance. Given that, due to various instabilities, the risks of corruption are more prevalent in developing countries in comparison to developed ones, corruption directly influences governance quality and thus may be detrimental to environmental policymaking.[12]

While one may argue that democracy implies minimal corruption, there exist non-democracies with a relatively low corruption rate (e.g. Rwanda, China) and democratic countries with a high corruption rate (e.g. Brazil, India). Corruption and democracy are covariant to at least some extent, but as the analysis will show, I find that a higher level of democratization and lower rate of corruption are essential for successful "green governance" in developing countries. On the one hand, this contributes to the scholarly debate about whether good governance is associated with democracy. In the case of environmental governance, such an association is evident. On the other hand, it demonstrates that corrupt governance is incapable of responding to environmental challenges effectively, which poses a double danger to developing countries, given their environmentally vulnerable positions.

This paper is structured as follows. I provide a theoretical framework in the second section, followed by my research design in the third part. Then, in the fourth section, I discuss the results of statistical analyses aimed at testing the hypotheses supplied in the theory section. My analysis will be complemented with two brief case studies – positive (Chile) and negative (Democratic Republic of Congo) cases – which will uncover the findings of my statistical predictions in more detail. Finally, I conclude with recommendations for the policymakers.

Theory

Regime factor

Scholars argue that democracy is a vehicle of good governance[13] and that good governance is the essence of democratic government.[14] However, it should be noted that good governance is not endemic to democracies alone, since other types of regimes may practice good governance as well.[15] Nevertheless, scholars perceive that democratic regimes produce more stable and well-functioning institutions that are the pillars of effective governments, which in turn accomplish social and sustainable development based on basic principles such as the rule of law.[16] For example, Clulow and Reiner (2022)[17] note that democracy has a positive effect on the promotion of low-carbon energy sources in developing countries. This is consistent with Sandbrook (2000)[18], who argues that democratization and development in Africa are interconnected. He notes that the idea of democratization on the continent is essential for sustainable development and can facilitate government responsiveness to citizens' needs. Mawere and Mwanaka (2015),[19] in a similar fashion, argue that democracy is essential for sustainable development and good governance in Africa. Yet, Mawere and Mwanaka note that liberal democracy in the pure form, as dictated by the global North, ignores practices of coloniality and the indigenous context. Thus, authors argue that while such elements as inclusive political participation of citizens, effective public administration, transparency, and the rule of law, and others are fundamental for promoting an enabling environment for development and fostering the eradication of poverty, they should be combined with the indigenous practices and local turn in their implementation.

Indeed, local focus is increasingly considered by international financial institutions (e.g., IMF, World Bank) responsible for channeling financial aid in service of effective governance and development.[20] Yet, the major goal of these institutions is to build

democracies on the assumption that this will lead to good governance. One of the goals of this paper is to test this assumption in the case of environmental policymaking. As democratization and development literature has demonstrated, there is a close association between democracy and good governance, where Stockemer (2009: 252)[21] has proved that "crucial features of a democracy – accountability, political and civil rights for the citizenry, minority rights, and the implementation of a system of checks and balances between various institutions including the media, civil society, and the state apparatus – lead to better and more effective governance" in African and Latin American countries.

Given green political theorists argue that democracies, especially those that prioritize inclusivity, social justice, equality, participation, deliberation, dialogue, and engagement of people in decision-making, such as Brazil, Sweden, and South Africa, are better equipped to tackle environmental problems like climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss.[22] This paper assumes that democratic development in developing countries plays a crucial role in implementing effective environmental policies at the national level. In this regard, I state my first hypothesis:

H1: Developing countries with higher democratization levels tend to have more successful domestic environmental policies than undemocratic developing countries.

Next, I will turn to a discussion of the second factor contributing to the understanding of successful environmental policies in developing countries.

Corruption

Conditions for success in addressing climate change rest on the vertical and horizontal levels, where the former refers to the top-down international coordination efforts and the latter refers to the lower country levels in the form of municipalities and regions. It is important to note that success in the major part depends on the horizontal level, where the material, institutional, and socio-cultural capacity of a country determines the outcome of environmental policies.[23] Thus, public accountability, transparency, and impartiality of the country's institutions play a major role in the efficient implementation of environmental strategies.[24]

Corruption, as the opposite phenomenon to conscientious politics, erodes public institutions, undermines public service and subordination of the public interests, and, as follows, hides the true effect of harm posed by corrupt acts of the officials.[25] This means that corrupt public servants are incapable of addressing environmental challenges in an effective manner.[26] For example, if the state allocates funds toward building resilient homes for communities suffering from climate change, such as a rise in sea levels, but half of these funds are top-down appropriated, then it is impossible to help people to protect their lives, even though the problem is addressed partially with the remaining balance.

It has been proven that corruption leads to unsustainable practices such as unrestricted logging or irresponsible forest management,[27] illegal waste disposal,[28] oversight of the adverse effects posed by polluting firms,[29] and others that undermine the effectiveness

of addressing the climate change problem. Yet, corruption is not a notion of developing countries only, given that there are correlations between weak environmental policies and corruption that have been identified in advanced countries, such as within the Eastern bloc of EU members. For example, Pellegrini and Gerlagh (2006)[30] found that new members of the EU had lower environmental standards due to weaker institutional quality, while Teichmann et al. (2020)[31] found that environmental subsidies allocated to some EU countries are abused by businesses and corporations, which bribe officials and thus circumvent environmental laws.

It should be noted that institutional corruption in the literature is mostly discussed in the traditional sense of failings relating to healthcare, education, life satisfaction, and some other relevant domains. Scholarship on the relations between corruption and environmental protection is less examined, especially with regard to developing countries. Nevertheless, among the existing works in higher-income countries' contexts, there is evidence that a greater perception of corruption and lower trust in government is associated with weaker environmental policies (especially in nonmarket policies) and leads to less stringent environmental regulations.[32] Therefore, based on existing works, this paper will test to what extent the corruption level affects developing nations' approach to good environmental governance. Consequently, I state my second hypothesis:

H2: Developing countries with lower corruption levels handle environmental policies more successfully than those with higher levels

By exploring these two dimensions—that is, regime type and corruption level—I aim to bridge the gap in understanding how these factors affect developing countries' institutional capacity in addressing climate change. Thus, I will contribute to the literature intersecting the boundaries of green governance and institutional theory, albeit focusing on the developing world. Next, I will discuss my research design, followed by the results section, which will include data analysis.

Research Design

In this paper, I use a mixed-method approach to test two hypotheses stated in the earlier section. Specifically, in the first part, I will employ statistical analysis of factors affecting the success of environmental policies in developing countries, and in the second, I will use two brief case studies to validate my findings. In the following parts of a given section (before conducting the analysis itself), I will explain the data and variables used in my analysis as well as the limitations of this work.

Data

For the statistical part, I built the dataset based on indicators taken from such websites as the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI), which analyzes the transformation process toward democracy in different nations; the World Bank, which provides economic and policy indicators; EU websites that provide the information about the emissions rate; Transparency International, which suggests indicators on corruption; and UNDP that contains the information on Human Development Index (HDI). For the qualitative part, I use peer-reviewed journals, reports from

international organizations, governmental agencies based in the US and abroad, local and international newspapers, and blogs offered by credible institutions. My search process of these latter resources included utilizing keywords such as 'green governance', 'developing countries', 'Chile', 'DRC', 'corruption', 'democracy', and other related words in Google Scholar and the University library. I complement both parts with different approaches to find evidence of a different nature that could provide the answer to the hypotheses stated.

It should be noted that there are some limitations associated with the methodology of the BTI data,[33] which is coded by the country experts and may produce some unobserved bias. Additionally, indicators on corruption include the Corruption Perception Index (CPI), which is based on the public perception rather than direct measures of the corruption level. This CPI has been criticized by some scholars due to the question of reliability.[34]

Dependent Variable

My dependent variable is the success of national environmental policy in 2022, taken from the BTI website[35]. According to the BTI, the success of environmental policy is measured as 10/10 if the "environmental concerns are effectively taken into account and are carefully balanced with growth efforts" and "environmental regulations and incentives are in place and enforced" (BTI Codebook 2022: 35). In other words, the environmental policy in the country is successful if there are policies aimed at solving environmental challenges at the national and local levels and they are not simply declarative but implemented by institutions. This ranking has interim explanations ranging between 3 and 8, and failure as being 1/10 is measured when "environmental concerns receive no consideration and are entirely subordinated to growth efforts," and "there is no environmental regulation" (BTI Codebook 2022: 35). In other words, the policy fails when the government knows about the existing environmental problems that different communities in the country experience, but it does not prioritize these problems or undertake legal efforts to address them.

Independent Variables

Two independent variables are of primary interest as stated in the theory part: regime factor and corruption level. The former, taken from the BTI website, is measured as the democratization status in 2022 on a scale ranging from 1 to 10, where a score closer to 1 means being a hardline autocracy and closer to 10 being a consolidated democracy. Corruption level is measured via Transparency International's[36] Corruption Perception Index, ranging from 1 to 100, with scores closer to 1 being more corrupt and those closer to 100 being less corrupt. I use the indicators for independent variables to identify the positive and negative cases for my case study part below.

Control Variables

I use several control variables to distinguish the effects of regime and corruption level. Specifically, I use 2022 GDP levels as determined by the World Bank to control for the possible effect of industrialization on the success of environmental policy. While the debate on the relationship between environmental performance and GDP is ongoing, some research has demonstrated that economic growth affects environmental policies.[37]

I also control for forest cover, which is measured by the World Bank as forest area as a percentage of total country area. The assumption behind controlling this factor is that countries with larger forest areas may be either (i) more prone to protect their declining forests and undertake more effective environmental policies[38] or (ii) use the richness of the forest as a source of gaining income and therefore implementing irresponsible regulations that neglect illegal logging and forest trade.[39] Controlling for this factor will remove these two aspects that may impact the success of environmental policy and, therefore, will allow us to understand the more nuanced impact of regime and corruption.

I also control for emissions levels in developing countries, which is measured by the EU Emission Database for Global Atmospheric Research[40] in megatons. The literature on environmental performance has demonstrated that CO_2 emissions affect the stringency of environmental regulations,[41] namely that countries implement environmental policies to regulate greenhouse gas emissions. Finally, I control for HDI because research has shown that inclusive human development is affected by environmental degradation by contributing to water scarcity, a lack of sanitation, hunger, and inequality.[42]

Results: Statistical Analysis (Part I)

Given the data described immediately above, it should be noted that the sample size of my dataset consists of all developing countries, including those 'in transition' as defined by the UN. The countries in the dataset are diverse, with different regimes, economic capabilities, and corruption levels. Given the small sample size, the findings below should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, they are generalizable due to the strong effect of the association between response and explanatory variables.

For the analysis provided below, I used ordinary least squares regression models to test my hypotheses. Preliminarily, I conducted diagnostic tests for heteroscedasticity and multicollinearity. For the former, I performed the Breusch-Pagan Test to determine if heteroscedasticity is present. For full model 3, the results showed that BP = 6.0554, df = 6, p-value = 0.417, which means that given the p-value is not less than 0.05, there is no sufficient evidence to claim that the heteroscedasticity is present in the regression model. In other words, for the given model, error terms in model 3 are normally distributed. In the case of the latter, I estimated the variance inflation factor (VIF). "VIF measures the strength of correlation between predictor variables in a model."[43] The desirable threshold for VIF is between 1 and 2. Upon conducting the test, model 3 did not indicate values higher than 1.85 for each variable included in the model, which means that the multicollinearity is not a problem in each analysis.

As can be seen from Table 1 below, three regression models demonstrate the relations between the variables of my interest. The first model shows that both democracy status (or regime factor) and corruption level have positive and significant effects on environmental policy success in developing nations. By adding gradually other control variables in models 2 and 3 the effect remains in place. Specifically, from the full model we can see that while holding all other variables constant, an increase in democracy status by one unit has a positive and significant effect on environmental policy success at p<0.05, meaning that the more democratic a developing country is the higher the

probability it will implement effective and successful environmental performance at the national level (by 14%). This confirms the first hypothesis. Similarly, there is a significant positive relationship between corruption level and environmental policy success at the $p<0.01$ level, meaning that an increase in the corruption perception index by one unit increases the environmental performance by around 6.3%, ceterus paribus. This means that the lower the corruption in a developing country the better the environmental strategy at the national level does it have as predicted by the second hypothesis.

	Dependent variable:		
	environmental policy success		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
democracy status	0.157**	0.161**	0.139**
	(0.066)	(0.064)	(0.068)
corruption	0.079***	0.062***	0.063***
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.011)
log(gdp)		0.009	−0.005
		(0.063)	(0.070)
hdi		2.931***	3.013***
		(0.946)	(0.956)
forest cover			0.005
			(0.004)
emissions			0.0001
			(0.0001)
Constant	0.802**	−0.677	−0.684
	(0.340)	(0.665)	(0.713)
Observations	116	116	116
R^2	0.532	0.583	0.590
Adjusted R^2	0.524	0.568	0.567
Residual Std. Error	1.039 (df = 113)	0.990 (df = 111)	0.990 (df = 109)
F Statistic	64.275*** (df = 2; 113)	38.737*** (df = 4; 111)	26.146*** (df = 6; 109)

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 1: Ordinary Least Squares Regression for Environmental Policy Success

HDI indicators have positive and significant relations with environmental policy success at the $p<0.01$ significance level, confirming the theoretical predictions that the higher inclusive human development in the country the higher probability this country will implement effective policy to address environmental degradation.

Concluding this brief statistical test, I should highlight that this modeling approach may suffer from two potential problems: reverse causality and endogeneity (the inability to control for the rule of law, civil society, or legal enforcement). While this is a limitation to urge reader interpret the results with caution, it is also an avenue for further research to test alternative relations.

Results: Case Studies (Part II)

I use two case studies below to validate the findings from the above statistical analysis. I use Chile as a positive case and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as a negative case. The former has a high score in implementing national environmental policies (9/10) and at the same time, it has a high democracy status (9.2/10) and a relatively low level of corruption (67/100). The latter country is the opposite – unsuccessful in implementing national environmental strategies (2/10), undemocratic (3.67/10), and prominent corruption (20/100). I consider these two cases as a comparative strategy to juxtapose good and bad green governance.

Green Governance in Chile

In the 1990s Santiago was "one of the world's smoggiest cities."[44] Today, Chile has a modest yearly emission rate of 83.5 megatons (Mton), which is comparable to Belgium or Oman. Giving way to neoliberal development after the history of military dictatorship, Chile's environmental policy is one of the blueprints for the Latin American future or even the world.

The environmental changes took place in Chile in the second half of the twentieth century when a group of naturalists, scientists, and students started to agitate for ecological preservation in the wake of the degradation wrought by Chile's rapid economic development.[45] Since the 1980s, however, after mass protests and riots against the repressions and dictatorial rule intensified, Chile's environmental movement voiced their concerns about threats to biodiversity even more loudly. Centro de Investigación y Planificación del Medio Ambiente (CIPMA) was formed in the 1980s by a group of scholars that "obtained more resonance in the country than earlier preservationist activities" with the goal to inform the public through scientific seminars and environmentalist research.[46] This eventually led to the mobilization of different concurrent movements such as the pro-democracy movement. Thus, environmental degradation was linked to problems in the country's development and triggered the growth of civil society and network advocacy institutions and organizations[47] that affected the country's leadership.

After the fall of the Pinochet regime in 1990, the country's political discourse was seeped in environmentalism and sustainable development. However, there remained obstacles to the elitist regime that impacted the expansion and success of Chilean environmental policymaking.[48] Leftist opposition parties, such as the Socialist Party and Party of Democracy proposed legislation that supported the environmentalist agenda and suggested the creation of the Ministry of the Environment. Eventually, the National Environmental Commission was created in 1994, which in 2010 was replaced by the Chilean Ministry of the Environment. Since the creation of the Commission in 1994, the institutional capacity to address ecological problems relating to unsustainable natural resource management including the excessive mining and extraction of fossil fuels was weak. Yet, continued social dissatisfaction and stronger civil society institutions put pressure on the government due to the unprecedented environmental degradation level,[49] which eventually had to transform its approach towards the forestry, fishing, and mining sectors.

Authority	Function
Ministry of the Environment (MMA)	Work closely with President to design and implement environmental policies & programs
Council of Ministers for Sustainability	Deals with design and implementation of policies relating to sustainable use of renewable natural resources
Environmental Assessment Service (SEA)	Conducts the environmental impact assessments according to the laws
Superintendence of the Environemnt (SMA)	"Agency within MMA that is responsible for enforcing environmental regulations (including environmental licenses) and promoting compliance"
Environmental Courts	Jurisdictional bodies that resolve environmental disputes
Other agencies	National Geology and Mining Service; General Water Bureau (DGA); Agriculture and Livestock Service (SAG); National Forestry Corporation (CONAF), etc.

Table 2: Chilean Environmental Enforcement Agencies. Source: Adopted from Global Practice Guide: Chile Environmental Law

As the first democratically elected president of Chile in 1990, Salvador Allende continued the line toward the strengthening of trade liberalization, yet social pressure made him undertake environmental changes as well. "Chile's three worst areas of environmental degradation soon became the administration's top three environmental priorities: Santiago's severe air pollution, widespread water contamination, and pollution caused by the mining industry."[50] Finally, in 1994, along with the creation of the National Environmental Commission, Allende signed "Chile's first-ever comprehensive environmental law," the Environmental Framework Law directed at the creation of an effective regulatory system for Chile's nature.[51]

Today, Chile's Constitution states that all people have "the right to live in an environment free of contamination. It is the duty of the State to ensure that this right is not jeopardized and to promote the preservation of nature" (Article 19).[52] The country has a powerful administrative apparatus that regulates the enforcement of environmental laws (see Table 2). Given the low corruption rate in the country, the quality of the bureaucracy allows Chile to remain one of the top countries managing environmental issues such as waste management, finishing, energy regulations, and others. It conducted different projects since the beginning of the twenty-first century such as the development of non-conventional renewable energy generation sources (NCREs) or the National Lithium Strategy aimed at sustainable mining.[53]

In June 2022, Chile issued new legislation, the Framework Law on Climate Change, (known also as the Climate Act), that sets a goal of achieving greenhouse gas emissions neutrality by 2050 as suggested by IPCC. "This goal has also been confirmed in other instruments and strategies adopted by the country. Examples of this are the Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) – updated in 2020 and reinforced in 2022 – and the Long-Term Climate Strategy."[54] What is important is that this Climate Act besides creating regulatory mechanisms and the framework for good green governance, also creates "opportunities for public participation."[55]

Overall, Chile has become one of the developing countries with an effective national policy for climate action. It has transformed from a dictatorial and corrupt regime with a highly problematic environmental situation to a democratic government with minimal corruption and an efficient green governance framework involving civil society groups. This shows that the effect of growing civil society, democratic regimes more generally, and the efficient (minimally corrupt) administrative capacity make a huge difference for good governance in relation to effective environmental policy implementation.

Green Governance in DRC

The Congo Basin, stretching over six countries in central Africa, is a vast and lush rainforest teeming with wildlife.[56] It covers an area of 1.5 million square miles, making it the second-largest tropical forest in the world, after the Amazon.[57] The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) "is home to 60 percent of the Congo rainforest,"[58] and this is the country with the largest proportion of forest loss as a result of bad green governance.[59]

Since the 1990s, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been affected by domestic instability.[60] The country has also been working towards solving the issue of deforestation and has been developing a national forest strategy to prevent rapid ecological degradation. As part of a larger tropical forest strategy promoted by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the DRC has pledged to implement regulations that aim to conserve biodiversity and promote sustainable forest management.[61] In 1990, the country promised to conduct preventive measures to save forests and involve local communities dependent on them for the sake of carrying out good governance strategies in exchange for the international assistance that the World Bank, IMF, and other international organizations, such as World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), and many others offered.[62]

Nevertheless, international aid had a fragmented nature, which was dependent on the stability of the government and its true concerns in solving environmental problems. Given that the weak governance system developed under the tyrannic Mobutu regime was unreliable, the suspension of aid by various organizations was not a rare occurrence. As Majambu et al. (2021: 327)[63] note, however, the World Bank at that time still was interested in changing the governance in DRC, yet, as it is stated in the Bank's official documents, in sparsely populated and forest-rich countries as Zaire, "there [were] still options to conserve natural forest and woodland [...] however, major investments should [have been] preceded by policy reforms, and country capacity building, particularly in countries where the policy framework is poor and institutions weak."

Indeed, "poor governance and corruption are considered the biggest obstacles to protecting the country's forests from the pressures of subsistence agriculture and fuelwood collection, as well as the expansion of legal and illegal industrial operations."[64] In the DRC, the implementation of good governance practices has been impeded by a number of factors, including an undemocratic political landscape, political instability, and pervasive corruption stemming from illegal logging and the trade of endangered species. For example, the U.S. Department of State notes:

> *"As public officials responsible for wildlife protection, they abused their public positions by trafficking chimpanzees, gorillas, okapi, and other protected wildlife from the DRC, primarily to the People's Republic of China, using falsified permits, in return for bribes. Their corrupt, transnational criminal actions not only undermined rule of law and government transparency in the DRC but also long-standing wildlife conservation efforts.[65]"*

These obstacles have posed significant challenges to the preservation of the country's ecosystem. Following the Mobutu regime, subsequent governments either claimed ownership of natural resources or enacted superficial reforms that ostensibly regulated illegal practices but ultimately benefited the neo-patrimonial system, which profited from continued excessive logging and exploitation of the country's biodiversity.

As a result, the exploitation of nature has continued to thrive in the country, perpetuating challenges to the implementation of good green governance practices. Despite the outlawing of illegal logging practices in the country in 2002, the rate of such activities has remained unchanged at around 90%.[66] This is primarily due to the lack of responsible governance and oversight in the forestry sector. The failure to enforce regulations and to hold those responsible accountable has allowed illegal logging to continue without any significant consequences. Thus, unchecked exploitation of natural resources has led to devastating implications for the environment, including deforestation, soil erosion, and loss of biodiversity.

The failed environmental policy mechanism in the DRC is further catalyzed by the "widespread poverty, recurring conflict and economic dependence on mineral extraction," which "putting unprecedented pressure on the country's spectacular biodiversity, with poaching, pollution, deforestation, and soil erosion."[67] Hence, there is a systematic institutional weakness combined with the lack of civil society's engagement in formulating policies and an inability to implement efficient climate policies at the local level due to larger governance problems, which has caused an acute rise in environmental policy failures.[68]

Overall, a lack of transparency, rule of law, and reliable public institutions trapped in an unstable environment made DRC, the country with the most vital resource on the planet, as forest, into a country posing catastrophic danger to the well-being of people and nature. Such an environment makes corruption more likely to thrive and democratization less possible to sprout. As a result, the country is marred in a vicious circle where the inability to increase institutional capacity and improve its regime leads to the inability to promote actionable environmental policies.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that good environmental governance in developing countries is closely tied to democracy and corruption. I provide additional knowledge about the role of institutional arrangements and the type of regime in tailoring national policies addressing climate change within the developing world. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses have indicated that developing countries which lack democratic elements and have weak institutional capacities are more vulnerable to climate change.

While it can be argued that pure democracy, as promoted by Western countries, may not be suitable for the context of developing countries, the underlying assumption of this paper is that basic democratic institutions, embedded in local practices, are vital for designing and implementing effective strategies to address environmental problems. As demonstrated by two opposing cases—Chile and DRC—democratization and the creation of civil society groups have a positive impact on advocacy strategies that link development and environmental security, while rent-seeking and illegal activities caused by instability and weak institutional capacity undermine the prospects for a sustainable future.

While in this paper, I performed quantitative and qualitative analyses to systematically explore the question of what contributes to the effectiveness of environmental policies in developing countries, limitations should be noted which provide an avenue for further exploration. First, the statistical approach suffers from potential bias in BTI and CPI measurements that could be better replaced with alternative data in further research. Additionally, reverse causality between environmental policy, corruption, and regime type are difficult to disentangle, since poor environmental policies may undermine the legitimacy of the regime or lead to corruption. There is also a possibility to explore additional measurements not captured by the presented model, such as civil society impact on environmental policy or the quality of legal enforcement on the effectiveness of such policies. Finally, this work presented only two brief case studies. Future work would benefit from testing alternative cases with the suggested theoretical framework presented further above.

The findings in this paper—that is, the impact of corruption and regime type on environmental policy in developing countries—also offer implications for policymakers and international donors. While designing environmental projects with the involvement of international donors and organizations, it may be suggested to first assess the country's profile and evaluate the feasibility of undertaking the efforts in the contexts where democracy is lacking and corruption is high. However, this recommendation does not suggest that stakeholders should abandon the idea of implementing environmental projects in such countries. It suggests that the first step before designing such projects is the creation of ways to elevate countries' capacities to the level where implementation of environmental projects may bring positive effects on the domestic regulations and environmental situation. Otherwise, the corrupt landscape and undemocratic rule will minimize the potential effect that could be maximized in contexts with higher institutional capacity and transparency in place. In simple words, good green governance in developing countries requires an institutional foundation, which should be built before environmental policy is implemented.

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Trade War and Peace: Canada's Ontological Insecurity under Trump

Adin Chan

Abstract: *Both the tariff threats and '51st state' remarks made by President Donald Trump against Canada in the early weeks of his second presidency led to a nadir in Canada-US relations not seen in over a generation. More than just a dispute over trade, this paper argues that tariffs and annexation rhetoric produced a moment of ontological insecurity in Canada: Canadian political leaders and public alike have been forced to grapple with baseline assumptions of Canada's self-conception as the best friend and most trusted ally of the United States. This ontological insecurity has, in turn, led to changes in Canadian strategic thinking, as elites (re)articulate new narratives of Canadian identity to make sense of the changing social environment. While it remains too early to determine the long-term implications of the tariff threats and annexation rhetoric on Canadian foreign policy, this case presents an interesting empirical development for applying ontological security analysis to better understand the social dimension of international disputes.*

In early December 2024, President-re-elect Donald Trump joked to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at a dinner in Mar-a-Lago that Canada should become America's 51st state. Though the remark was initially described as a joke, even by Canadian dignitaries, Trump's first weeks in office saw an unprecedented change in American policy and rhetoric vis-a-vis Canada. President Trump threatened, and later imposed, tariffs on Canadian goods while referring to former Prime Minister Trudeau as a 'Governor' while repeatedly asserting his expansionist visions for Canada. The Canadian response to these tariff and annexation threats was a mix of outrage, fear, and an outpouring of patriotism with a distinctly anti-American flavour.

What has been striking in the Canadian response is the deeply personal nature of the conflict. The Canada-US relationship runs much deeper than the economic interdependence and joint free market between the two nations. They share the world's longest unprotected border, share military intelligence, and jointly monitor continental air defence.[1] They share sports leagues, power grids, and are each other's primary source of international visitors.[2] They have a long history of cooperation on transboundary environmental issues and international security.[3] After 9/11, more than 40,000 Canadians served in the US-led Afghanistan War, during which 158 Canadian soldiers were killed. The tariffs and annexation threats in Trump's first weeks are therefore not just a dispute about industrial policy. In the eyes of many Canadians, it was a betrayal by one's best

friend or family member.[4]

This paper explores the rapid deterioration in Canada-US relations in the first months of Trump's second presidency through the paradigm of ontological security studies. It first asks whether the tariffs and annexation threats gave rise to a moment of ontological insecurity in Canada. Having argued that Canada did indeed experience a period of ontological insecurity, the paper then considers how that insecurity will affect Canada's predominant strategic cultures – Atlanticism, Continentalism, and Commonwealth Imperialism – to examine the long-term strategic implications for Canada's foreign policy.

Ontological security is a well-established subdiscipline of international relations that makes an analogy between the self and the state: just as individuals seek a stable sense of self embedded in predictable relationships, so too do states seek a stable identity which is reinforced through social practice. Moments of ontological insecurity for an individual trigger significant internal distress, which causes the individual to question their assumptions about who they are and whom to trust. This unease pushes them to search for different identity narratives to make sense of their new reality. For a state, this means a search for, or rediscovery of, new identities, historical frames, and trust conceptions with which to view international politics. The empirical development of Canada-US relations offers a new case to examine the implications of ontological insecurity for narratives and threat perceptions.

Following a brief literature review of ontological security studies and overview of Canada-US relations, the substantive analysis will proceed in two parts: an initial survey of Canadian attitudes amidst President Trump's annexation and tariff threats, which reveals the sharp rise in anti-American sentiment and deeply personal nature of the dispute, followed by a more focused discourse analysis of how Canadian public figures produced, and at times resurrected, new national autobiographical narratives and adjusted threat perceptions to meet the moment.

These elite-level narratives and foreign policy perceptions do not come from nowhere; recent strategic culture scholarship suggests that countries exhibit multiple strategic subcultures, each with its own historical narratives and self-conceptions. I will examine, therefore, how the Trump tariff and annexation ontological security shock influenced each of Canada's traditional strategic subcultures in different ways. While there is no consensus among strategic culture scholars on the exact typology of strategic subcultures in Canada, this paper follows Massie & Vucetic's classification of Atlanticist, Continentalist, and Commonwealth Imperialist strategic subcultures which have all shaped Canadian defence strategy and practice over the country's history. The paper will also consider the longer-term implications of ontological insecurity on Canada's strategic direction. Although the future trajectory of Canadian foreign policy remains too early to discern, the discursive evidence confirms that ontological insecurity is indeed a salient factor for shaping the narratives and threat perceptions for strategic subcultures.

Review of the ontological (in)security literature

One of the many subfields of international relations scholarship to emerge amidst the cultural turn of the late 1990s and early 2000s is that of ontological security. The need for ontological security is 'extrapolated from the individual level': individuals require a stable sense of self, since a consistent identity brings order to one's world and fosters cognitive and behavioural certainty.[5] This builds on the work of sociologist Anthony Giddens' The Constitution of Society, in which he argued that certainty in the routines and practices of daily life produces expectations which help us to secure ourselves as social beings.[6] Jennifer Mitzen was one of the first to propose that states, like individuals, 'engage in ontological security-seeking' by 'minimising hard uncertainty and imposing cognitive order on the environment.' This is done by developing a basic trust system, which simplifies reality for states by taking the most dangerous or threatening questions off the table.[7] This state of ontological security through stable expectations of daily life is sustained through routinised behaviours and social relationships with significant others.[8]

While Mitzen's seminal article focused on stable expectations of daily life, Steele argues that 'states seek ontological security because they want to maintain consistent self-concepts', which affirm how a state sees itself. These self-conceptions are 'constituted and maintained through a narrative which gives life to routinised foreign policy actions.'[9] Narratives are the 'stories by means of which self-identity is reflexively understood' and give meaning to a state's past and imagined future.[10] These narratives need not be a record of everything that has ever happened in a state's history, but rather they focus on highlights and experiences which matter most. The interactive international environment can impact a state's sense of self and bring its narratives in question, which produces ontological insecurity and creates demands for a new draft of the state's narrative.[11]

Like good health or a strong internet connection, the need for ontological security is most evident once it's gone. Giddens defined these critical situations as a 'set of circumstances which, for whatever reason, radically disrupt accustomed routines of daily life.'[12] Subotić's work on ontological insecurity in international relations examines how in periods of threat and uncertainty, narratives are 'selectively activated to provide a cognitive bridge between policy change while also preserving ontological security through providing autobiographical continuity.'[13] Elites do so by linking necessary policy changes with particular roles or historical memories which are familiar to their audiences. New narratives don't come out of nowhere – they are consciously activated or deactivated by political actors to preserve the broader ontological security narrative. Subotić cites the example of Serbian foreign policy vis-a-vis Kosovo and its tacit acceptance of Kosovo's government in 2013 despite Serbia's longstanding self-image of Kosovo as its 'Jerusalem' dating back to the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. Subotić finds how Serbia activated the 'sacrificial' part of this national story while de-emphasising the 'imminent return' implication.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine represented a significant ontological security shock for Europe.[14] Chancellor Olaf Schulz went so far as to call it a 'Zeitenwende' or

historic turning point. Della Sala articulates that the return of inter-state war shook the EU's foundational myth and noble narrative – that it was born from the ashes of World War II and the recognition that nationalism and war should be replaced with closer cooperation and peaceful relations.[15] Integration was the process for creating a new international order based on peace and stability, not fear and uncertainty. The revival of great power politics on the European continent has revealed the enduring importance of hard power and military security. Della Sala argues that 'the Ukraine crisis weakens the EU's foundational narrative as an exceptional actor and highlights how crisis in this instance is not a basis for falling forward but for putting into question its sense of self.'

Not every shock generates the same sense of consternation and upheaval. Sceptics may reject the binary distinction between ontological security and insecurity. Hagström suggests that 'critical situations are not an aberration from the normal but a more endemic aspect of great power self-identification and ontological security-seeking...the self [is] more fundamentally fluid and fractured, incoherent, and incomplete.'[16] It is also true that the sharp distinction between security and insecurity can be misleading, since these conditions are fluid and dependent on interpretation.

The literature remains inconclusive on the specific conditions that make a political event an ontological security shock, as well as on how to distinguish between critical and ordinary situations.[17] Steele offers a criteria for critical situations which requires that they affect a substantial number of individuals, catch state agents off guard, and cause agents to perceive that they could be eliminated.[18] However, Steele also acknowledges the ambiguity of identifying these critical situations, writing 'it is largely unimportant whether I as a researcher decide that a series of events meets this definition...what is important is whether agents interpreted an event as a "critical situation".'[19]

The central argument of this paper adopts Steele's somewhat more interpretivist understanding of ontological security shocks: critical situations exist when they are perceived to be a critical situation by elites and the public alike. Researchers can then look at available evidence to support their claims for whether an ontological security shock has (not) happened. The following section examines the history of the Canada-US relationship to put the tariff and annexation threats into a broader historical context. Available evidence reveals that there has been a violation of the 'basic trust system' in Canada's ontological security, as demonstrated by the sharp cascade in public attitudes towards the United States, spontaneous acts of public outrage, and political speeches across the political spectrum. Though perhaps not as dramatic as Serbia's claims to Kosovo or the Russo-Ukraine War, the expansionist rhetoric of Trump and the threat of tariffs have provoked a significant shift in expressions of Canadian identity in both political discourse and public reactions alike.

Trade Shocks and Ontological Security

Canadian history is replete with trade shocks from its closest friends and neighbours. In 1846, Britain repealed the Corn Laws and adopted free trade, which ended Canada's preferential access to its markets and pushed it to turn towards the United States as a trade partner.[20] The economic fallout was so significant that hundreds of primarily English-speaking merchants and reformers signed the 'Montreal Annexation

Manifesto' in 1849 calling for annexation to the United States.[21] The movement failed to gain significant popular support, in part because Canada eventually achieved access to American markets with the signing of the Elgin-Marcy Reciprocity Treaty in 1854.[22] The treaty established a period of free trade between the two countries, with reduced duties on natural resources and agricultural products. Reciprocity was abruptly terminated by the United States in 1866, in part due to dissatisfaction with Britain over its perceived support for the Confederacy during the American Civil War.[23] The loss of the American market strengthened the case for Canadian Confederation, which was achieved the following year.

The twentieth century saw several more trade shocks to Canada from the United States. The Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930, imposed as a response to the Great Depression, prompted strong reactions and a pivot back to the United Kingdom. Canada took a leading role in negotiating the Ottawa Agreements of 1932, which once again gave Canada privileged access to the British market.[24] Under President Nixon, the United States imposed a 10% surcharge on all imports, including Canadian goods.[25] Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau tried to change Nixon's view, telling him 'If you're going to be protectionist, let's be in it together...I am not a nationalist, I am not a protectionist – if you were going to take a very protectionist trend, our whole economy is so importantly tied to yours, we'd have to make some very fundamental decisions.'[26] Though Nixon's tariffs were brief, lifted four months after they were first imposed, they caught Canada by surprise and prompted a significant shift in Canadian economic and foreign policy, a policy shift which shall be explored further in this paper.[27]

Trade relations between Canada and the United States faced frictions again in the twenty-first century. Border thickening after 9/11 negatively impacted cross-border trade flows, and President Obama's 'Buy American' stimulus policy mandated that projects had to source their iron, steel, and manufactured goods exclusively from the United States.[28][29] These 'fender benders' would soon pale in comparison with the tariffs on lumber, steel, and aluminium imposed by President Trump during his first term in office.[30] Nevertheless, those tariffs were eventually lifted with the signing of the US-Canada-Mexico Free Trade Agreement in 2019.[31]

Significant trade shocks from close allies are insufficient to generate ontological insecurity. Reflecting on Steele's criteria for an ontological security shock, it must affect a substantial number of individuals, catch state agents off guard, and cause agents to perceive that they could be eliminated. Most importantly, these situations must be interpreted as critical situations by elites and public alike. According to ontological security studies, these moments of ontological insecurity then generate re-imaginations of state identity and a selective articulation and re-telling of autobiographical narratives. Based on these criteria, the cases of British free trade (1846), reciprocity abrogation (1866), and the Nixon shocks (1971) could stand out as moments of ontological insecurity for Canada since they combined surprise, existential anxiety, and sweeping social consequences. These cases all contributed to significant pivots in Canadian national narratives and identity, including the formation of Canada itself. The motivation for this paper, however, is to examine whether the trade shocks and annexation rhetoric in the first weeks of President Trump's second term can also qualify as an ontological

security shock to Canada and, if so, assess how that ontological insecurity is driving narrative, identity, and geo-strategic change.

Trump II and Canada's Ontological Insecurity

"Geography has made us neighbours. History has made us friends. Economics has made us partners. And necessity has made us allies."

~ President John F. Kennedy address to the Canadian Parliament May 17, 1961

The first weeks of President Trump's second term brought a new rhetoric of annexation unprecedented in the past century and a half of Canada-US relations. From his election win to his first month in office, President Trump referenced Canada as the '51st state' in five separate social media posts, including a map of North America covered in the American flag, while repeatedly referring to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as 'Governor Trudeau.'[32]

In response, Canadians booed the Star-Spangled Banner at professional sport events, cancelled travel plans to the United States, and pledged to boycott American products. Almost overnight, Canadian public opinion underwent titanic shifts, with a rally-around-the-flag effect propping up an erstwhile deeply unpopular Liberal government and visible expressions of patriotism not seen in generations. While scholars of political behaviour might take interest in how a new common enemy has caused a striking change in the hearts and minds of Canadians, this paper looks at these shifts through an ontological security lens: more than just uniting around a common enemy, the overtly annexationist tone and economic threats from the American president had produced enormous ontological insecurity in Canada which was revealed in the new narratives and memories evoked by Canadian leaders and public alike.

The tariff and annexation rhetoric provoked such a strong, overtly patriotic reaction because the United States as a friend and partner is fundamental to Canada's physical and ontological security. Yes, Canada and the United States share extensive political, economic, and security ties. They are each other's most significant trading partner and source of foreign investment. They jointly participate in continental air defence through NORAD and work together through NATO and Five Eyes intelligence sharing.[33] Over 400,000 people cross the border each day. But beyond these material ties, the relationship also has a strong ideational and social dimension: the United States is viewed as a close friend and partner, and any territorial ambitions toward Canada have been unthinkable to both the Canadian public and political elite for over a century.

One prominent narrative frame used to describe the Canada–US relationship is that of family and kinship.[34] In their first meeting after the 9/11 attacks, George Bush Jr. said to Prime Minister Chrétien: 'An amazing thing came up the other day. Somebody said to me, well, you know, in your speech to Congress, there were some that took affront in Canada because I didn't mention the name. I didn't necessarily think it was important to praise a brother; after all, we're talking about family.'[35] Chrétien replied, 'I think that, as

you say…we're your neighbour, friends and family…and we had a great demonstration of support when 100,000 Canadians appeared on the hill to offer support to our neighbour and friends and family, the Americans.'[36]

Similar kinship narratives have been expressed by successive presidents. Obama declared 'the United States and Canada are not simply allies, not simply neighbours; we are woven together like perhaps no other two countries in the world. We're bound together by our societies, by our economies, by our families.'[37] Biden described Americans and Canadians as 'two people, two countries, in my view, sharing one heart. It's a personal connection. No two nations on Earth are bound by such close ties — friendship, family, commerce, and culture.'[38]

That Canada imagines itself as having a unique friendship with the United States is not unique to Canada. Britain, of course, cherishes its 'special relationship' as first coined by Winston Churchill. France similarly cites its long history with the United States from the Revolutionary War up through to the Beaches of Normandy and present day. But this bears little relevance on Canada's self-image. For Canada, the near kinship bonds of mutual trust and affection are an integral part of Canada's ontological security. The policy shift in Washington in President Trump's second term has undermined this foundation, perhaps irreparably, provoking the largest exogenous shock to Canadian ontological security in living memory.

The sense of personal betrayal is clearly revealed in Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's address to the Canadian people on February 4, 2025, in the face of imminent tariffs to be imposed (and later temporarily postponed) by Trump. He recited President Kennedy's quote on Canada-US relations and goes on to say:

> *"From the beaches of Normandy to the mountains of the Korean Peninsula, from the fields of Flanders to the streets of Kandahar, we have fought and died alongside you during your darkest hours. During the Iranian hostage crisis, those 444 days, we worked around the clock from our embassy to get your innocent compatriots home. During the summer of 2005, when Hurricane Katrina ravaged your great city of New Orleans, or mere weeks ago, when we sent water bombers to tackle the wildfires in California, during the day the world stood still — Sept. 11, 2001 — when we provided refuge to stranded passengers and planes, we were always there, standing with you, grieving with you, the American people."*

Trudeau's speech is replete with references to a historical narrative which expresses Canada's core ontological security: that it is a reliable friend and partner to the United States, which is sustained by its repeated interactions of cooperation and support. Trudeau's political adversary, Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre, shared similar attitudes towards the United States in a speech a few weeks later, expressing that Canadians view the United States as neighbours and friends, and that there is no other country with whom we would rather share a border.[39] 'If Canadians aren't your friends', Poilievre asked, 'then who is?'

Important for this ontological security shock is not just the policy disagreement over tariffs, which as history shows has happened throughout Canadian history, but the

genuine sense of betrayal from their closest friend – a deeply personal relationship. Evidence of this can be found beyond just these political speeches and in other parts of Canadian society. In the Real Kyper and Bourne hockey podcast, sports commentators Nick Kypreos and Justin Bourne said 'you want to drag in a President that wants to strip us of our country on a day of a hockey game…they don't know how sensitive we are about this annexation stuff, it's a joke there, they don't know how touchy we are about this, which we should be.'[40] Fasken Martineau DuMoulin LLP, one of Canada's most influential law firms, cancelled a corporate retreat in Las Vegas because 'Canada is facing an unwarranted economic attack by what has, for more than 150 years, been its closest ally and trading partner.'[41] Every incidence of Canadians expressing betrayal with their closest friend would be well beyond the scope of this paper, but these two disparate examples from high-profile figures in Canadian society demonstrate the breadth, magnitude, and deeply personal nature of this ontological security shock. Early polling has shown that the percentage of Canadians with favourable attitudes towards the United States dropped from 52% in June 2024 to 33% by March 2025.[42] Even more striking, just over a quarter of Canadians polled in February 2025 considered America as an enemy country.[43]

It is worth mentioning that the ontological insecurity is not strictly proportional to the actual credibility of the annexation threat. Trump himself stated he would use economic, rather than military means, to turn Canada into the 51st state.[44] While the threat of economic coercion is credible, American domestic politics and the delicate partisan balance of the Senate makes Canadian statehood a non-starter even in the outlandish world in which Canadians agreed to joining the United States. Opinion polling early into Trump's second term found that only a third of Canadians believed annexation was a serious ambition.[45] It was therefore not the fear of American tanks rolling across the border that drove these elevated threat perceptions but rather the previously unimaginable disregard for Canadian sovereignty in American discourse which triggered the ontological security threat.

Trump's first month back in office upended relations between America and many of its allies. Annexation fears were not unique to Canada, with Greenland, Panama, and Gaza also the subject of expansionist remarks by the president. Nevertheless, the threat of economic coercion and rhetoric of American domination has become a 'Zeitenwende' moment for Canada as it realises the fragility of its quasi-fraternal relationship with the United States. The next section looks at the 1971 Nixon shocks as a past example of ontological insecurity in Canada and explores how it led to selective re-awakenings of identity narratives and policy changes in the foreign and domestic realm. I then consider how Trump's ontological security shock has impacted Canada's various strategic subcultures, with an eye to how this moment will impact the future collective historical memory in Canadian foreign policy.

Strategic Implications of Ontological Insecurity

According to ontological security studies, moments of insecurity can generate changes in state policy and autobiographical narratives. It's important to recognise that this has happened before in Canadian history. In the aftermath of the Nixon shocks, for example, Mitchell Sharp, Canada's Secretary of State for External Affairs, wrote an influential

article entitled Canada-US Relations: Options for the Future. The motivation for his paper was clear:

> "In the past, Canadians have generally supported an easy-going, pragmatic approach to our relations with the United States in the belief that Canada's separate national existence and development were fully compatible with an unfolding, increasingly close economic, cultural and military relationship between the two countries. Many Canadians no longer accept this view...It is widely believed that the continental pull, especially economic and cultural, has gained momentum. In this on-going national debate, the fundamental question for Canada is whether and to what extent interdependence with the United States impairs the reality of Canada's independence.[46] (Emphasis added)"

Sharp identified three paths Canada could take in light of the exposed risks of American interdependence: (i) maintain the status quo, (ii) move towards closer integration with the United States, or (iii) pursue a 'comprehensive long-term strategy to strengthen the Canadian economy and other aspects of its national life' to reduce Canadian vulnerability.[47] In his evaluation of these paths forward, the question of Canadian identity is front and centre, which reflects his anxiety about Canada's autobiographical narrative and distinctiveness from America. He writes: 'If Canadians say they want a distinct country...it is because they want to do the things they consider important and do them in their own way.'[48] Any closer integration with the United States would 'involve costs in terms of the Canadian identity' and 'could involve a serious strain on the domestic consensus in Canada.'

Pierre Trudeau's government pursued the 'third option': on the home front, his government adopted a national industrial strategy by limiting foreign investment and building state-run corporations, such as Petro-Canada. As for strategic policy, the Trudeau government pivoted to Europe as a counterbalance to the United States, which was a marked difference from past policy. Mahant writes that the Nixon shocks had a 'profound effect on Canadian policymakers, already under pressure from some sections of public opinion to react to what appeared to be a growing Canadian dependence on the United States,' which 'led directly to a new attitude towards the European Community.'[49] According to Mahant, 'until 1971 or 1972, Canadian policymakers viewed the European Community with apprehension. The Common Agricultural Policy and the treaties with Mediterranean and African countries were seen as threats to Canada's interests,' but 'these apprehensions did not...lead to the formulation of a new policy until the changing attitude towards the United States.'[50] Yet another reason for pivoting to Europe was that Canada's traditional partner, Britain, had joined the European Economic Community in 1973, which simultaneously expanded the attractiveness of trade with Europe while cutting Canada's preferential access to the British market.[51]

The brief case study of Canada's response to the Nixon shocks reveals a crucial insight about ontological insecurity and strategic policy: latent anxieties about Canadian identity and its distinctiveness from the United States were compounded by the Nixon shocks, leading to a period of acute ontological insecurity. This led to dramatic policy changes not just on the home front but also in international affairs: perceptions of the United States and Europe changed among Canadian decisionmakers, resulting in new

foreign policies.

While Sharp wrote of the 'three options', a typology which enjoys considerable currency in Canadian discourse, his options centre primarily around economic and culture matters, with a narrow focus on Canada-US relations. Another way to think about Canada's foreign policy postures is through its distinctive 'strategic cultures', each of which has historically guided Canadian foreign policy and practice at some point in its history.

Massie and Vucetic identify three dominant strategic subcultures in Canadian political discourse which have shaped Canadian foreign policy and practice: Atlanticism, Continentalism, and Commonwealth Imperialism.[52] While other subcultures have influenced Canadian politics, such as Pearsonian Internationalism and Isolationism, they have taken a diminished role in recent years.[53] Strategic subcultures are not mutually exclusive. They are also not deterministic – many Atlanticist political leaders frequently invoke the special relationship with America. Canada's significant involvement in the War in Afghanistan, for example, is in line with both Atlanticist and Continentalist impulses. However, the utility of strategic subcultures as a theoretical concept comes from disaggregating the different 'currents' in a country's political culture when pertaining to questions of international affairs.

The next section surveys these three dominant strategic subcultures and then examines how their adherents have changed their narratives and threat perceptions after the ontological security shock brought about by Trump's first months in office. I also offer some reflections on how Canadian foreign policy might evolve given its latest ontological security shock.

Atlanticism

The Atlanticist strategic subculture emphasises Canada's Atlantic identity and commitment to NATO.[54] Atlanticism values maintaining transatlantic solidarity and avoiding Anglo-American unilateralism, with the aim of raising Canada's relevance in international politics. France's role in NATO and historic connection to Canada resonates with Canada's own domestic bilingual identity.[55] Whereas Continentalism is more associated with the Conservative Party, the Liberal Party tends to express more Atlanticist views on international politics.

Justin Trudeau's successor, Mark Carney, has invoked strong Atlanticist rhetoric in the early months of his tenure, though with significant changes in trust perceptions vis-à-vis Europe and the United States. In his first speech as Liberal leader, Carney made the following remarks: 'The Americans want our resources, our water, our land, our country. Think about that. If they succeed, they will destroy our way of life.' He continues later exclaiming: 'America is not Canada. And Canada never, ever, will be part of America in any way, shape or form…in trade, as in hockey, Canada will win. But, this victory will not be easy. We are facing the most important crisis of our lives.' It is hard to overstate the significance of this speech and the dramatic shift in attitude toward the United States: they are a threat to not just Canadian resources but also a threat to sovereignty and the Canadian way of life. Notably, Carney did not mention threats from Russia or China in

his inaugural speech. The most salient threat was the American one.

Atlanticism in Canada has always relied on balancing American and European interests while elevating Canada's role in NATO as a way to remain relevant in global politics.[56] Trump's retreat from NATO and European security more broadly has pushed Canada to advocate even stronger for the alliance's continued relevance and Canada's own place in European affairs. A somewhat tongue-in-cheek editorial in The Economist proclaimed that Canada should join the EU, citing the joint interest in the face of American unilateralism.[57] While such a formal institutional arrangement remains the stuff of fantasy, the collapsing Canadian public opinion towards the United States will likely push Canada to rekindle other familiar friendships. In a break from tradition, Carney's first international trip as Prime Minister was to Europe, not Washington. He stated it was important to strengthen ties with 'reliable allies.'[58] President Macron replied that Canada was the 'most European of non-European countries.'[59]

In this environment, it seems that Atlanticist strategic culture will continue its hegemony in Canadian foreign policy: Canada has thus far retained its commitment to NATO and even committed to expanded defence spending to meet its 2% (and later 5%) obligation.[60] Coordinated foreign policy moves with the UK and France regarding recognition of the Palestinian state have also signalled a stronger alignment with Canada's traditional European partners.[61]

In addition to elite-level alignment, the post-Trump ontological security shock has dramatically adjusted the public's friend-foe calculus, leading Canadians to be far more distrustful of America while becoming more enthusiastic about European relations. Early public opinion data seems to validate these claims, with one finding that a plurality of Canadians would support EU membership.[62] This poll also found that while Canadians thought of America as their most important relationship at the time, they also anticipated the relationship with the EU surpassing in importance within three years. The historical memory of the Trump shock may harden these attitudes and consolidate the Atlanticist paradigm for years to come.

Continentalism

The shared historical experience of World War I & II and the emerging Cold War saw the United States go from Canada's security threat to Canada's guardian.[63] An emerging 'Continentalist' strategic subculture began to shape Canadian perceptions and foreign policy as Canada increasingly embraced its identity as a North American, rather than British, country. This identity took the form of close security cooperation through the creation of the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) in 1958, which monitored and controlled continental airspace. Canada and the United States also signed the 'Auto Pact' of 1965 which formally integrated automobile manufacturing in North America.

The relationship with the United States became of paramount importance, with Canada seeking to reassure its powerful ally that it was a reliable partner. Given the power imbalance, maintaining Canadian sovereignty was a sensitive issue for Ottawa. Writing in 1984, Nils Ørvik assessed Canada's Cold War strategic position as follows: 'we face

two threats, one from expanding incompatible systems, currently represented by the Soviet Union...the other threat comes from our neighbours to the south who, in their legitimate concern about the security of the North American continent, might offer us "help" which we may not want, but still cannot reject because it also serves our own national interests as well as theirs.'[64] For Ørvik, the best way to prevent Washington's encroachment on Canadian sovereignty would be to credibly show that Canada could hold its own without a physical American military presence, or as he calls it a "defence against help" strategy.

Even after the Cold War, the identity of Canada as a North American country and reliable American ally remained an enduring feature of Canadian politics. Up until Trump's second presidency institutional bonds remained firm, cemented by the North American Free Trade Agreement (1992) and its successor, the US-Canada-Mexico Free Trade Agreement (2019). There is also evidence that this closer integration is not just a rationalist or functionalist economic preference but a reflection of embedded continentalist attitudes in the Canadian public.[65] These attitudes are most visible in Alberta, which can be traced back to its immigration by frontier ranchers in the late nineteenth century which instilled a more American political culture when compared to the loyalist waves of immigration elsewhere in English Canada.[66]

Continentalism today is associated with the Conservative Party of Canada but this has not always been the case. The Liberal government under Wilfred Laurier (1896-1911) unsuccessfully pushed for free trade with America while the Conservatives led by Robert Borden feared economic ties would lead to American annexation.[67] Pierre Trudeau's tenure (1968-1979; 1980-1984) saw a rise in social democratic nationalism and an ambivalent attitude toward the United States, which gradually changed the ideological orientation of continentalism in Canada.[68] Progressive Conservative leader Brian Mulroney opposed the economic nationalism of Trudeau Sr. and pushed the Canadian right-wing to gradually embrace free trade with the United States undergirded by an ideological Continentalism.[69]

The tension between Continentalist and Atlanticist subcultures is best demonstrated through the role conceptions invoked in debates on whether Canada should have joined the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Then-Prime Minister Jean Chrétien defended Canada's non-participation in the Iraq War because it was not approved by the United Nations Security Council. The fact that it was a unilateral mission, rather than NATO-led, further weakened its legitimacy. In contrast, Canada's participation in the NATO campaign in Kosovo demonstrates that either UNSC-approval or NATO-command are necessary conditions for Atlanticist participation.

In response, then-Leader of the Opposition and future Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, wrote an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal entitled "Canadians Stand With You" in which he lamented: 'For the first time in history, the Canadian government has not stood beside its key British and American allies in their time of need...make no mistake, as our allies work to end the reign of Saddam and the brutality and aggression that are the foundations of his regime, Canada's largest opposition party will not be neutral. In our hearts and minds, we will be with our allies and friends.'[70]

The ontological insecurity shock has been particularly difficult for Continentalist attitudes in Canada. While many Canadians continue to hold pro-American views, the narratives and self-conception of being America's staunchest ally and partner have been challenged and are increasingly difficult to sell to the voting public. The response from Continentalists in Canada has been largely focused on economics and trade, recognising the need to diversify markets without necessarily viewing the United States as a threat to Canadian way of life as Atlanticists have suggested.

In a keynote address to Midwestern Legislative Conference in July 2025, former Prime Minister Stephen Harper remarked: 'I think it's fair to say I'm probably the most pro-American prime minister in Canadian history...but this really is a wake-up call for this country to truly diversify its trade export markets...just because we have that geographic proximity does not justify the degree of dependence that we have on a single market.'[71] This sentiment echoes remarks given by Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre during the 2025 election campaign. Poilievre's 'Canada First' speech kept threat perceptions fixed on traditional adversaries and kept space for cooperation with the United States. He promised: 'Our military will protect our national interest—including by carrying our weight in North America to secure and leverage more trade with the United States, all while becoming less reliant on them for our defence...hostile powers like China and Russia want our resources, our shipping routes, and to be within striking distance of our continent. We won't let them. We will defend our seas, our skies and our soil.'[72]

Perhaps most interesting with respect to the relationship between ontological insecurity and autobiographical narrative has been the evolving historical memory of Canada's first Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald, in the discourse of Canada's Conservative Party and its leader, Pierre Poilievre. In a 2012 speech unveiling the newly renamed John A. Macdonald building across from Canada's Parliament Hill, then Parliamentary Secretary Pierre Poilievre reflected on the first prime minister's legacy as follows:

> *"It's thanks to him we have the Canadian Pacific Railway, it's thanks to him we have the formation of the Northwest Mounted Police, it's thanks to him we have the very first national park...in Banff, Alberta, and most of all it's thanks to him that we have a Confederation, a dominion that we all inherited. This was his greatest achievement: stitching together a nation comprised of different ethnicities, religions, cultures, backgrounds – people who were warring for centuries on the other side of the Atlantic – whom he forced into a peaceful, harmonious and, most importantly, free nation."*[73]

Note that this historical memory narrowly focuses on domestic policy achievements, without referencing his anti-American credentials. In Poilievre's Canada First speech in February 2025, however, he emphasised Macdonald's anti-American roots, declaring:[74]

> *"Conservatives, as the Party of Confederation and Sir John A. Macdonald, will restore the promise of Canada. Our founding party leader united our country from the Atlantic to the Pacific and warded off American designs to dominate our continent. In the words of our first Prime Minister, Conservatives will fight to "give us a great, a united, a rich, an improving, a developing Canada, instead of making us a tributary to American laws, to American railways, to American bondage, to American tolls".*

That is the Conservative legacy for Canada. (Emphasis added)"

The renewed focus on the anti-American positions of early conservatives illustrates the dynamic nature of historical memory. The argument here is not to say that Poilievre was being duplicitous or just instrumentally deploying new rhetoric to meet the moment: rather, this is a compelling example of how an ontological security shock can lead to a selective re-telling of national autobiographies in order to provide a sense of continuity and familiarity.

Continentalists in the post-Trump shock have tapped into deep historical narratives of Canada's conservative, anti-American Fathers of Confederation while maintaining support for economic and defence cooperation with the United States. The historical memory of the Trump shock could nevertheless live on for years, which would solidify into a broader anti-American consensus in wider public opinion and diminish the persuasiveness of the Continentalist strategic orientation.

Commonwealth Imperialism

The Commonwealth Imperialist subculture emerged from Canada's history as a British colony and its close relationship to one of its "mother countries." The relationship between Canada and Britain in the first decades after the Acts of Confederation in 1867 was more than economic or political, it was also deeply personal. Much of the English Canadian population in the early nineteenth century had come from America fleeing the Revolutionary War and harboured negative attitudes towards the United States. Many English Canadians signed up for the Boer War in 1899 as an act of patriotism for the empire.[75]

Overt expressions of Canada's British Imperial connection gradually waned after World War I, with much of Canada's political trajectory in the 20th century focused on coming into its own as a country. Nossal writes: 'Canadian involvement in the Great War diminished the enthusiasm for imperialism among many English-speaking Canadians. While it did not extinguish imperial sentiment, it did give rise to a desire to control all elements of policy, domestic and external...a logical outgrowth of the autonomy in domestic policy achieved with confederation in 1867.'[76] Though Canada achieved formal independence at the Statute of Westminster in 1931, '[this] did not suddenly extinguish those imperialist sentiments that had fuelled the enthusiasm for war in 1914...imperial sentiment would linger throughout the interwar period [but] its political impact was more limited.'[77] Canada's participation in the Ottawa Conference of 1932, which granted preferential access to the British market, demonstrates the enduring connection with Britain even as the country came into its own. Canada remains an active member of the Commonwealth and has yet to see an overt republican movement to replace its monarchy.

As Canada searches for reliable allies, Canada's ties with the United Kingdom and its Commonwealth relationships may re-emerge in Canadian discourse. One of the implications of an ontological security shock is a strong sense of insecurity as one navigates a new and destabilising environment, and Canada's British institutional heritage is one such narrative and identity which might offer familiarity and stability.

Indeed, Carney's swearing-in speech made several direct allusions to this Britain link: 'The ceremony we just witnessed reflects the wonder of a country built on the bedrock of three peoples: Indigenous, French and British. The opening and closing prayers evoke the original stewards of this land to remind us of the deep roots from which we grow and underscore the values to which we aspire. The office of the Governor General links us through the Crown and across time to Canada's proud British heritage.'[78]

One obvious policy decision which would reflect this Commonwealth strategic culture and historical emphasis on Canada's British heritage would be the free movement of people and goods between Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom – known colloquially as 'CANZUK.' Such a move enjoys a wide coalition of support, even before the Trump-shock. Former Conservative leader Erin O'Toole is in favour,[79] while Liberal leadership contender, Frank Baylis, declared his support for CANZUK during an intra-party debate: '80 percent of our trade exports go towards the United States. That's why I propose a new economic bloc that would gather the CANZUK countries – Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. Why? Because we share the same kind of government, we share the same kind of values, the same language, and it means we can work together closely.'[80]

Bell and Vucetic note that the CANZUK discourse is rooted in imperial history and in particular efforts to create a federalised empire.[81] Its loudest proponents in the United Kingdom have historically made the case for CANZUK in decidedly racialised and Eurosceptic terms, with the movement gaining traction in the aftermath of Brexit. With this imperial baggage, CANZUK had largely been written off as an undesirable or unworkable project. The ontological security shock, however, may be changing the terms of this debate. The Overton window for speaking of Canada's British identity has been widened in the face of such anti-American public sentiments and the search for a stable and secure ontological identity. In reference to fears that Britain wasn't standing up for Canada against Trump, Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly remarked 'it is just in our DNA to be close to the UK.'[82]

The Commonwealth strategic culture, with its pro-CANZUK friend calculus and imperial historical memory, is not incompatible with the aforementioned Atlanticist pivot in Canadian discourse. Subcultures are helpful tools for understanding the cultural roots of different 'currents' in foreign policy discourse, not mutually exclusive theories of state behaviour. The argument advanced here is simply that the ontological security shock has led to a redefinition of stable identities and a search for historical meaning. One such identity and self-conception is Canada's British linkage, which may push Canada to pursue strengthened Anglosphere security and economic cooperation.

Conclusion

Trump's tariff and annexation threats were not just a political challenge for Canada, nor were they merely a threat to Canada's political and economic security. They also constituted a threat to Canada's ontological security – its stable sense of self and the patterned relationships which constitute its social identity. After decades of quasi-fraternal relations shaped by mutual trust and cooperation, Trump's, previously unthinkable, '51st state' rhetoric created a rupture in Canada-US relations.

This ontological security shock altered the historical narratives and friend-foe calculations of Canada's dominant strategic subcultures. Atlanticists have embraced a dramatic pivot away from America and towards Europe, framing the United States as a serious threat to national identity and security. Continentalists have tapped into old historical memories of Canada's Fathers of Confederation, emphasising their nationalist bona fides while nevertheless keeping the door open for a continued, albeit diminished, relationship with the United States. Meanwhile, the relatively dormant Commonwealth strategic culture has enjoyed a revival, driven by efforts to distinguish Canada's identity from the United States through a renewed emphasis on the country's historic British roots.

The case of Canada in the first months of Trump's second presidency illustrates the analytic utility of strategic culture and ontological security in understanding the relationship between foreign policy and national identity. Identity narratives and historical memories are never fixed but rather reimagined to fit the contemporary political moment, and dramatic shocks to a nation's sense of self have the power to precipitate these reimaginations.

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COMPETITION LAW AND THE TRADING OF HUMANS: INVESTIGATING THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GLOBAL ANTITRUST LEGISLATION AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Charlotte Stevens

Abstract: *This article explores how global competition law shapes conditions for human trafficking. It argues that deregulated markets, narrow legal definitions, and opaque supply chains often enable exploitation, while corporate data protections hinder oversight. Case studies show how monopsony power, subcontracting, and digital platforms facilitate trafficking. The paper proposes integrating human rights into antitrust policy through expanded legal definitions, greater transparency, and the use of data and AI. It concludes that aligning competition law with anti-trafficking goals is essential to reducing systemic exploitation.*

Human trafficking is one of the oldest and most persistent forms of exploitation, and competition law is among the youngest branches of economic regulation. Despite operating in separate legal spheres, both intersect in ways which remain underexplored, particularly as global supply chains, labour markets, and corporate structures evolve. In today's economy, trafficking can thrive not merely in dark underbellies or lawless areas of society, but through the loopholes of modern legal and market systems.

How can this be so? This paper will examine the foundational assumptions of global antitrust law and policy, whether they enable trafficking, as well as potential reforms that competition frameworks could introduce as tools against it. Drawing on migration, labour, and anti-corruption law as well as a range of case studies as lenses, we can explore how competition policy may both hinder and help anti-trafficking goals in an increasingly globalised economy.

Historical Context and Legal Foundations

The origins of modern antitrust legislation can be traced back to the 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act, a landmark statute that laid the foundation for domestic and, eventually, international competition law. By the 1990s, many countries in South America and the post-Soviet bloc began implementing their own antitrust frameworks, while China's

Anti-Monopoly Law came into effect in 2008. Contemporary antitrust law, though relatively modern, has been shaped by older legislative domains like labour, migration, and anti-corruption law. Of these, labour law shares the most conceptual overlap with human trafficking and exposes some of the underdeveloped areas within antitrust when it comes to addressing exploitation.

In the European Union, the legal distinction between "undertakings" and "workers" illustrates one of the clearest examples of this gap. Under EU competition law, an "undertaking" refers to any entity engaged in economic activity and bearing financial risk.[1] This definition excludes workers and their unions, meaning that collective bargaining agreements are exempt from antitrust scrutiny. While this exclusion serves to protect workers' rights, it also has the consequence of excluding undocumented or trafficked individuals from protection under both labour and competition law. As a result, victims of trafficking – many of whom lack legal status – are left without legal recognition if they attempt to collectively negotiate the conditions of their exploitation.

This creates a significant legal blind spot. Trafficked individuals, even when performing economically valuable labour, cannot access protections under Article 101 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which prohibits collusion and abuse of dominance. Even when legal exemptions are sought, the burden of proof falls on the trafficked person who often lacks legal support, language access, and institutional recognition, rendering these exemptions largely inaccessible.[2]

Employers can exploit this vulnerability by coordinating wage suppression for undocumented workers. Labour market dynamics, particularly monopsony power, allow dominant firms to reduce wages and working conditions without legal consequence. Advocate General Szpunar, in the Elite Taxi v Uber Systems Spain case, highlighted this dynamic, noting: "While this control is not exercised in the context of a traditional employer-employee relationship, one should not be fooled by appearances... Uber's financial incentives and decentralised passenger-led ratings allow it to manage its drivers just as effectively—if not more so—than through formal managerial structures."[3] Uber, while highly visible, represents just one example. Many digital platform companies operate without significant regulatory oversight, and jurisdictions often hesitate to intervene in the name of protecting competitive markets. Ironically, this non-intervention can entrench monopolies and increase vulnerability to trafficking, as unregulated firms scale rapidly while outsourcing risk.

Human trafficking also flourishes under conditions of low legal permeability and high migration pressure. Traffickers exploit gaps in migration systems to offer forged documents, and false employment promises to those fleeing conflict, poverty, or unstable political regimes. Despite this, many jurisdictions with strict immigration policies maintain competition laws that promote cost-cutting and labour outsourcing—creating incentives to exploit vulnerable workers. A notable example is found in Cranford's 2005 "Networks of Exploitation" study, which examined the Los Angeles cleaning industry. It found that undocumented Latino workers were consistently hired over unionised labour. These workers, recruited through informal social networks, were pressured to bring in friends and relatives to work long hours for low pay. Responsibility for

recruitment was outsourced to on-site supervisors, who prioritised cost reduction over fair hiring practices. Legal protections were virtually absent, and new hires were often required to perform hours of unpaid "trial" labour.[4]

This case illustrates how competition law can indirectly enable trafficking: first, through strong inter-firm rivalry in industries like cleaning, and second, through lack of oversight over labour agencies that function as economic actors without meaningful regulation. When weak labour laws intersect with deregulated competition environments, trafficking networks can operate with impunity. In this context, anti-corruption law also emerges as a key complement to antitrust. Both frameworks aim to protect the integrity of markets and prevent abuses of power. A combined approach that allows competition authorities to coordinate with anti-corruption bodies could strengthen investigations into supply chains, wage manipulation, and human rights abuses. Internal corporate compliance programs that address bribery and unethical labour practices could also serve as entry points for greater antitrust scrutiny in high-risk sectors.

Ultimately, the evolution of competition law has brought it into closer contact with issues of labour exploitation, but this intersection remains insufficiently addressed. A more integrated legal approach, one that considers trafficking as both a human rights and economic issue, is essential to reducing vulnerability and ensuring fairer market systems.

Globalization and Evolving Dynamics

Human trafficking manifests in various forms, the most common of which is forced labour. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), trafficking involves "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit."[5] Common trafficking mechanisms include debt bondage (where individuals repay inflated debts through labour) fraudulent recruitment practices, and physical or psychological coercion. As globalisation accelerates, trafficking has become an increasingly complex and transnational issue, one whose implications are now reaching the attention of competition policymakers and enforcers.

Contrastingly, competition law focuses on promoting fair market conduct and maximising consumer welfare. Its remit has not traditionally included direct engagement with human rights violations like trafficking. Globalisation has, however, blurred the boundaries between economic regulation and social harm, exposing a need for competition law to expand its scope. The intersection between competition and trafficking lies particularly in supply chains, where market pressures and weak oversight can mask or even incentivise exploitation.

Modern supply chains span multiple tiers, from procurement and production to distribution, and trafficking can be facilitated at any stage. The drive for cost-efficiency, when combined with opaque contracting and inadequate auditing, can create environments where trafficked labour thrives. In many instances, liberal economic policies that promote deregulation and outsourcing also generate demand for low-wage and low-skill labour, often resulting in companies in the Global North benefiting from

exploitative conditions in the Global South, where weak labour protections and poor enforcement make trafficking more prevalent.

The cocoa industry in West Africa provides a compelling example. Despite years of international attention, child and forced labour remain pervasive in cocoa production in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. A 2024 report by the U.S. Bureau of International Labor Affairs emphasised the importance of "multistakeholder approaches" to reduce forced labour, but real progress remains limited.[6] Global chocolate manufacturers often rely on complex supplier networks which makes it nearly impossible to trace the origin of raw materials or enforce labour standards. As the 2023 Côte d'Ivoire Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report noted, corruption and complicity continue to undermine law enforcement efforts.[7] Audits are often superficial and fail to detect trafficking at local or national levels. Thus, even where formal policies against trafficking exist, structural weaknesses in the supply chain and in enforcement allow trafficking to continue. Competition law may inadvertently enable this through protections that shield firms from scrutiny in the name of commercial confidentiality, so compounding the issue is the difficulty in collecting reliable trafficking data.

Because trafficking often occurs in informal or illicit economies, statistics are fragmented and inconsistent.[8] However, competition law generates robust datasets on market dominance, abuse of power cases, and digital platform activity that could help identify the economic environments most prone to trafficking. NGOs and regulators could use this data to pinpoint high-risk industries, supply chain vulnerabilities, or specific business models that rely on exploitative labour. Similarly, economic indicators such as employment patterns, corruption levels, and innovation rates could provide further insights, although it remains difficult to isolate the single most influential factor due to the data's complexity and inaccessibility.

A major barrier to progress is corporate control over critical trafficking-related data. Information about supplier relationships, working conditions, and sourcing practices is often treated as proprietary and therefore shielded under competition law. However, given the scale and severity of trafficking, it could be argued that this data should be made partially available for human rights oversight. Initiatives such as targeted transparency regulations or public-private data partnerships could give NGOs and regulators the tools needed to monitor risk within supply chains more effectively.

This is not a new proposal. Similar challenges exist in the financial sector, where data control by private institutions obstructs efforts to track trafficking-related financial transactions. In 2019, the World Economic Forum (WEF) warned that financial institutions often fail to distinguish trafficking from other illicit transactions, stating: "on their own, financial institutions struggle to identify and disrupt trafficking-related transactions because their data models cannot distinguish money-laundering transactions from trafficking ones."[9] Until technology improves to reliably differentiate such patterns, the most viable interim solution remains transparency, supported by legal frameworks that balance commercial confidentiality with the urgent need to protect human rights.

Supply chains which have long been considered logistical rather than legal spaces have become key battlegrounds for anti-trafficking efforts. Integrating competition law into initiatives, particularly through data-sharing and transparency, offers a valuable opportunity to reduce the systemic exploitation hidden behind market efficiencies.

Legislative Analysis

For the purposes of this economic discussion, the essay adopts a monopolistic competition model to explain the dynamics of human trafficking. In this context, traditional monopolies do not emerge due to relatively low barriers to entry, but nor does perfect or "workable" competition occur. The illicit nature of trafficking imposes unique criminal and financial risks that distort market behaviour. Within this irregular structure, traffickers supply differentiated 'products' – that is, victims with varying perceived utility to buyers, resulting in individualised demand curves for each trafficker.[10] These characteristics reflect monopolistic competition's key traits: product differentiation, market power, and freedom of entry and exit.

Monopsony conditions also appear in parallel. The labour supply for trafficked work is imperfectly elastic, particularly in vulnerable populations. As a result, traffickers can pay wages that are equal to or even below the supply price of labour, well beneath the worker's marginal value product.[11] The further wages fall from a competitive equilibrium, the greater the likelihood of exploitation. In this way, labour market power, when combined with weak regulatory oversight, creates ideal conditions for trafficking, even within competitive markets. Ironically, policies designed to encourage competition may exacerbate these dynamics by ignoring the structural inequalities that traffickers will exploit.

Intermediaries are central to trafficking markets, especially in migration-related trafficking. In regions with high emigration rates traffickers face lower recruitment costs owing to the abundant supply of vulnerable individuals which effectively reduces their fixed costs and attracts more entrants into the market. These intermediaries can operate at either business-to-business or business-to-consumer, which expands the range of trafficking methods. This points to two ways in which competition law could be better integrated into anti-trafficking efforts: first, by broadening the legal definition of "undertaking" to include intermediaries; and second, by embedding a rights-based approach into fair competition policies. However, current competition law frameworks were developed to govern traditional markets of goods and services, and as such, they are poorly equipped to handle the complex and layered networks that trafficking relies on. While antitrust law defines an "undertaking" as any entity engaging in economic activity, many intermediaries operate outside formal recognition. This legal blind spot enables trafficking to flourish, as key actors remain invisible to enforcement mechanisms even while distorting markets.

Industries reliant on subcontracted labour, such as agriculture and construction, illustrate this issue. For example, in 2023, the U.S. Department of Labor found that Packers Sanitation Services had employed 102 children (primarily undocumented migrants) in hazardous roles within slaughterhouses across multiple states.[12] The adults responsible

for recruiting and supervising these children actively obstructed the investigation. A government spokesperson noted that such abuse occurs "when employers do not take responsibility to prevent child labour violations."[13] In this case, trafficked minors were funnelled through multiple recruitment and subcontracting layers, shielding primary employers from liability. This type of exploitative subcontracting creates unfair competitive advantages – and without a legal mechanism to hold intermediaries accountable, competition law may inadvertently support trafficking-friendly structures.

As markets evolve, digital platforms increasingly replace physical ones which offer direct or mediated access to goods and services. The black market has similarly adapted to online environments, exploiting the anonymity and speed of digital transactions. Enforcement responses have generally prioritised user privacy and online freedoms, making it difficult for regulators to pursue perpetrators. This regulatory tension between safeguarding internet freedom and enabling effective prosecution continues to challenge anti-trafficking efforts in the digital age. This tension is magnified by the emergence of platform-based work, with apps like Uber Eats offering a business interface through which self-employed individuals can offer services that meet minimum quality and logistical standards. This structure, however, also facilitates trafficking in two ways. First, it allows illicit services including trafficked labour to be concealed within legitimate online offerings. Second, it reduces the liability of the platform provider by framing trafficked individuals as "self-employed" rather than employees.

As Lianos, Countouris, and de Stefano observe, these "gig workers" often find themselves "in the grip of the so-called platform economy, controlled by machines and managed by algorithms, into the working of which they do not have any access or insight, and with no recourse to legal labour protections."[14] This loss of agency and lack of legal protection makes such workers, especially those trafficked, seem uniquely vulnerable. Without reform, digital labour platforms risk becoming enormous vectors for trafficking, offering plausible deniability to businesses while further obscuring the exploitative conditions endured by workers. Whether through subcontracting chains or digital gig platforms, economic actors exploit regulatory blind spots to reduce costs and shield liability. Updating competition law to reflect these realities by expanding definitions, increasing transparency, and recognising digital market risks, is essential to ensuring that competition does not come at the cost of human rights.

Conflicts and Challenges

Having examined antitrust frameworks and relevant case studies, we now turn to the inherent tensions between direct anti-trafficking measures and existing competition regulations. Many jurisdictions are reluctant to interfere with market practices that appear to enhance innovation and efficiency, largely because competition policy is explicitly designed to foster these outcomes. When unethical labour practices drive down production costs, accelerate innovation, and lead to cheaper consumer goods, a fundamental conflict emerges: whereas competition law encourages efficiency, anti-trafficking efforts demand protective (and often costlier) regulatory oversight.

Väyrynen (2005) underscores the gravity of this conflict by describing humans as the "ideal commodity" from a competition standpoint: "they do not easily perish, but

can be transported over long distances and can be used and re-sold."[15] Such logic is telling of the economic calculus that trafficking networks rely upon. When competition enforcement ignores human exploitation, regulatory blind spots emerge – especially during merger assessments, market inquiries, and antitrust investigations that fail to account for human rights risks embedded within global supply chains.

Internationally, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) affirms that each state bears responsibility for its acts or omissions that breach international human rights obligations.[16] This reinforces the principle that antitrust authorities cannot absolve themselves from the consequences of private criminal actors operating within or alongside competitive markets—especially when those states are signatories to international treaties with enforceable human rights obligations. Many of these treaties have direct implications for competition law. For example, the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime includes several protocols relevant to migration and trafficking, one of which is the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants. Article 6.1 obligates states to criminalise the act of "[e]nabling a person who is not a national or a permanent resident to remain in the State concerned without complying with the necessary requirements for legally remaining in the State."[17]

While this provision targets irregular migration, it also inadvertently enables the exploitation of trafficked persons by making them vulnerable to deportation threats. Crucially, it doesn't account for the economic contributions of trafficked workers or their victim status. As such, it reinforces the asymmetry between open economic liberalisation, which benefits competition, and the systemic vulnerabilities that trafficking exploits. Empirical evidence supports this view through Peksen and Blanton, who found that a country transitioning from a heavily regulated economy to a fully liberalised one faces a more than 200% increase in the probability of trafficking for forced labour.[18] This statistic indicates that when antitrust law facilitates neoliberal economic models without considering their social consequences, it indirectly contributes to conditions favourable to trafficking.

This is boosted by the intentional use of trafficked persons in low-level, high-risk roles such as recruitment, cash handling, or advertising. By assigning these risky tasks to victims, traffickers reduce their own exposure while shifting legal liability onto the exploited individuals.[19] In such cases, victims may be prosecuted rather than protected, while businesses that benefit from this system remain untouched. The central contradiction is that antitrust promotes low-cost efficiency, while anti-trafficking demands costlier protective frameworks. This divergence creates a structural tension that today's regulatory environments are not equipped to resolve.

The question of state responsibility in aligning competition law with anti-trafficking efforts is further complicated by the artificial separation of humanitarian concerns from economic regulation. In political discourse, social and economic objectives are often polarised between progressive approaches that prioritise social protection and conservative ones that champion deregulated markets. Antitrust policy, claims to support both consumer welfare and economic growth, yet it often fails to consider

labour rights in any meaningful way. The EU provides a useful illustration of this dilemma in stating that its competition law aims to "ensure fair and equal conditions for businesses, while leaving space for innovation, unified standards, and the development of small businesses."[20] Despite some progress, such as the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (2024), the core of EU competition policy remains focused on price, output, and market efficiency, with limited integration of labour protections or human rights safeguards.

Competition law portrays itself as a pillar of economic and social development that is designed to prevent market abuses. Yet it also incentivises the exploitation of vulnerable workers due to misalignment with labour law and rigid migration frameworks. Without meaningful coordination across these legal domains, competition policy risks perpetuating the very harms it should help prevent. To close these gaps, a fundamental rethinking of the foundations of competition law is required. Policymakers must broaden the scope of antitrust to include human rights considerations, especially as they relate to labour exploitation in global markets. Failing to do so will not only hinder efforts to combat trafficking but also undermine the legitimacy of competition law as a tool for equitable economic development.

Opportunities for Reform

As globalisation accelerates, competition authorities are uniquely positioned to play a central role in combating human trafficking through data collaboration, regulatory innovation, and proactive enforcement strategies. One promising avenue is their potential contribution to open data platforms shared among researchers, legislators, civil society organisations, and international institutions. These platforms could be leveraged by the UN, state anti-trafficking agencies, and NGOs to enhance bilateral, regional, and global cooperation which would enable timely information exchange and more effective interventions.

Artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies offer powerful tools in this space. They can facilitate seamless integration across large datasets while detecting patterns indicative of trafficking risk. Early success stories like FDRM, a supply chain risk management platform, demonstrate the promise of AI to flag trafficking vulnerabilities across complex supplier networks.[21] These innovations enhance transparency and accountability without infringing on market freedoms, while also identifying high-risk industries that require closer scrutiny.

Beyond enforcement, AI can also improve the efficiency and reach of awareness campaigns which are critical to fostering compliance. For example, a study by the UK's Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) found that fewer than half of British companies surveyed could correctly identify anti-competitive practices such as market sharing, price fixing, and abuse of dominance.[22] This highlights a major knowledge gap that can be addressed through more intelligent, targeted dissemination of compliance information using AI-driven systems. By improving awareness, competition authorities can directly reduce the conditions that enable trafficking alongside anti-competitive behaviour.

Additionally, competition law has the capacity to define and measure labour market power more precisely, distinguishing between its natural occurrence and its abuse in exploitative contexts. Advocates have suggested a framework of specific criteria for policy evaluation, such as an employer's ability to suppress wages below competitive levels, impose coercive contract terms, or capture disproportionate market share in any given labour segment. [23] These indicators have the potential to form the basis for targeted investigations or policy interventions, particularly in sectors known to attract trafficked labour.

Where direct market intervention is not viable, labour audits in high-risk industries or the enhancement of whistleblower protections can offer alternative solutions. These approaches encourage employees, particularly those vulnerable to retaliation, to speak out while also allowing regulators to proactively uncover trafficking practices before they distort labour markets or solidify into systemic abuse. Opportunities for progress also exist in routine regulatory actions, such as merger reviews. These proceedings often centre on price effects and innovation but can be expanded to include labour impacts. A forward-looking example is found in the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's (ACCC) March 2025 draft update to its Merger Assessment Guidelines, which invited public comment on potential reforms. The ACCC proposed recognising labour exploitation as a form of non-price competitive harm, marking a significant step toward integrating social responsibility into antitrust evaluations.

The tools to align competition law with anti-trafficking objectives already exist. What is now required is the political will and regulatory permission to integrate them. By embracing digital tools as well as redefining market power and expanding review criteria, competition authorities can contribute meaningfully to dismantling the economic structures that allow trafficking to persist.

Conclusion

The intersection of antitrust and human trafficking reveals a complicated and somewhat overlooked dynamic, in which the pursuit of economic efficiency may unintentionally sustain exploitative practices. While competition law is intended to curb market abuse and encourage innovation, it too often overlooks the human toll embedded in deregulated labour markets, opaque supply chains, and narrow legal definitions of economic actors. As a result, the very frameworks meant to safeguard fair competition are routinely exploited by traffickers and intermediaries who operate in the legal blind spots.

Addressing this problem requires more than patchwork labour protections or reactive enforcement. What is needed is a fundamental reconceptualisation of antitrust policy that integrates human rights considerations into its foundational aims and expands the definition of market harm to include systemic exploitation. By enhancing transparency, redefining legal terminology to reflect modern economic realities, and leveraging technology, policymakers can begin to align competitive markets with reducing human trafficking. If competition law is to remain relevant in the context of globalised trafficking networks, it must evolve beyond a tool for protecting markets alone. it must evolve into a regulatory tool that not only protects markets, but the people who sustain them.

Charlotte Stevens

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INTERVIEW SECTION

BARRY BUZAN

Interview by Brian Kot

In February, STAIR's Managing Editor spoke with Barry Buzan, Emeritus Professor of International Relations at the LSE; honorary professor at Copenhagen, Jilin, and China Foreign Affairs Universities; a Senior Fellow at LSE Ideas; and a Fellow of the British Academy. A leading figure in international relations for several decades, Professor Buzan has shaped debates across Global IR, the English School, and the Copenhagen School. This issue's theme was partly inspired by his March 2024 International Politics article, "A New Cold War? The Case for a General Concept," in which he argues that today's international system can be meaningfully analysed through the lens of cold wars. This interview delves deeper into those arguments and reflects Buzan's broader interest in global order, civilisational dynamics, and conceptual innovation in IR theory. Read alongside the interview with Professor Jennifer Lind in this issue, Professor Buzan challenges the view that the Cold War was a unique historical case that defies comparison, arguing instead that contemporary international politics can be meaningfully analyzed through the general concept of cold war. This conversation was edited for clarity.

Can you tell us more about the background for your International Politics article? What motivated you to write the piece, and why did you think 2024 was the right moment to write it?

I was at a workshop in Princeton discussing a whole range of current affairs. I used the phrase "Second Cold War" in my remarks and immediately got pushback from historically minded scholars like Arne Westad, which surprised me. I hadn't thought it was controversial.

That triggered my interest, and I thought I needed to make a case for the term because a lot of people, mainly historians, don't like it. They tend to reject it because today's world doesn't resemble the first Cold War exactly. This struck me as, frankly, a poor way to think about historical comparisons because historical events are never identical. So I started askingHow can we approach this conceptually? To make the term useful analytically, I realised we had to give it theoretical grounding.

My starting point was the phrase itself, cold war. The obvious opposite is hot war. This means we can split the category of war into two types. It's not peace—not cold peace or warm peace—but a distinct type of war. That was the basis for the article I ended up writing. I initially submitted it to International Affairs, thinking it was a good fit—some theory, some current relevance, useful for policymakers. But they almost desk-rejected it; I got a couple of very brief, negative reviews. My argument had a more receptive audience at International Politics, and that's how the piece came to be.

What were some of the major criticisms against your argument, and what would be your counterargument?

I haven't seen any direct criticisms of the article. It hasn't been out very long, so there hasn't been much time for people to engage with it deeply. It has had some acknowledgment, especially in discussions about the Cold War that have come out since. But ultimately, I think the disagreement comes down to perspective. Some people insist that any discussion of cold war has to start with the original Cold War as the reference point. So they focus on whether there's ideological competition, economic interdependence or separation, and all the other hallmarks of the First Cold War. And sure, you can take that approach—but to me, it's a dead end. If you peg a concept too tightly to one historical case, you remove it from theoretical analysis altogether.

What are the analytical benefits of making cold war a general concept?

Any conceptual framework aims to create general categories that let us compare things based on shared conditions. Then you have a choice—do you subdivide those categories? In this case, the choice is whether to distinguish between hot and cold wars. I think we should because there's a historical boundary, specifically around 1945, after which the fear of great power war created a different kind of conflict. My argument is that the Cold War is a relatively new phenomenon, tied to the advent of weapons of mass destruction. These weapons made all-out great power war irrational because it is too dangerous and too costly. If great powers engage in an all-out war, there's a serious risk that all of the participants will be destroyed. Therefore, whilst we might not have needed to differentiate between hot and cold wars before 1945—because all wars were hot—after 1945 we need to split this category because we're in a different set of global conditions. The old meaning of war is not irrelevant, but no longer sufficient to describe the strategic reality for great powers today.

How does the Second Cold War differ from the first?

Broadly speaking, I think this current Cold War is less dangerous than the first one. The first Cold War was driven by a zero-sum ideological struggle over who would control the world. That dynamic doesn't define today's great power relations. From an English School perspective, you could even say the challenge now is the opposite—that no one wants to take responsibility for the world. As a result, international society is becoming seriously under-managed, especially in the face of pressing collective problems.

Today, the great powers appear to assume a more defensive posture, seeking to secure their own spheres of influence rather than project universal ideologies. There's more of a civilisational tinge to this. You see it most clearly in relation to China. The whole mantra of "Chinese characteristics" is basically saying, China wants to be China and resists universal values peddled by someone else. Russia and others express similar sentiments. This makes today's rivalry less about global domination and more about carving out space for different systems. It is potentially more amenable to negotiation, though not necessarily easy to resolve.

At the same time, this era introduces new challenges. Technologies like cyberspace, which didn't exist in the First Cold War, have created a kind of permanent clashing frontier—open, low-cost, and accessible to many. A distinctive feature of the Second Cold War is "infrastructure war," in which states attack each other's social or physical infrastructure below the threshold of hot war. This is different from the First Cold War, where such attacks were less common. The danger lies in not knowing how far such actions can go before triggering a hot war response. Still, there are similarities too. Both Cold Wars involve "half proxy wars", in which one of the principal great powers is fighting against a proxy of the other side. This was the case for Vietnam in the First Cold War, and Ukraine in the current one.

> *If the Second Cold War is more about regional dominance, how would you respond to characterisations of China as having a vision for the international order? Critics would highlight the Belt and Road initiative and China's participation in the United Nations and other multilateral institutions to reshape some international norms.*

We need to take a few steps back because this raises a much bigger framing questionWhat kind of world are we actually in? I don't see the current moment primarily as a power transition between the United States and China. That dynamic exists, of course, and it's not unimportant, but it's just one small corner of a much larger picture. The main story is the end of the Western-led world order and the emergence of a second round of modernity. The first round of modernity empowered a small group of countries—mostly Western, plus Japan—which ran the global system for about a century largely unchallenged, because no other regions had yet joined the modernization process.

That began to change in the 1970s with the rise of the Asian Tigers, followed by China and India. This shift is transforming the world from a two-century Western-centric order, where a single civilisation dominated others and shaped global institutions in its own image, to something far more decentralized. I would call this emerging reality "deep pluralism," a world of multiple centers of wealth and power, each grounded in its own cultural and civilisational vision. The Chinese and Indians, for example, both assert—and I tend to believe them—that they have no intention of exporting or imposing their civilisations on others. In fact, many Chinese would argue that Chinese civilisation cannot truly be adopted by outsiders. You're either Chinese or you're not, which is quite different from American civilisation, which says, in principle, anyone can become American.

China, in this view, represents a more self-contained, inward-looking civilisation. Quite reasonably, it wants the international order to reflect its growing weight in terms of wealth, power, and cultural and political authority. But at present, the global system still disproportionately reflects the legacy of the old Western-dominated world order. It is ridiculous that Britain and France have permanent seats on the UN Security Council, but Japan, Germany, and India don't. I'm seeing a transition from a world dominated by a few Western powers to one marked by a much more diffuse and pluralistic distribution of wealth, influence, and authority. That's the game.

> *This is a really different framing than the predominant discourse of*
> *U.S.-China competition and power transition.*

Well, the United States and China like the story that it's about them because it flatters them, just like the Soviet Union and the United States liked bipolarity because it flattered them. But it just doesn't represent what's going on. You would expect most American and Chinese academics to be talking about that, because that's what their audience wants to hear. When you're my age, you get a bit cynical about what people say.

> *A prominent feature of the first Cold War is the division of nations*
> *into blocs. To what extent are we seeing the same development, or is a*
> *different dynamic at play?*

It's a different dynamic in the sense that there's a great deal of resentment about the Western world order and the way the West has dominated affairs and is still hanging on to it, even though it is now in disarray. Its liberal ideology has become discredited in a way similar to communism.

The world today is not divided into two blocs, with a third non-aligned camp, as it was during much of the First Cold War. BRICS is a very interesting coalition, but it is not an alliance, and it's never going to become an alliance or even a bloc because the members have extremely diverse interests. But BRICS is a useful diplomatic device for the Global South—and for China and Russia—to gather a multifaceted coalition to push against the remnants of Western hegemony and world order. In other words, if the West is no longer dominant, nothing else will hold BRICS together. Its members have their own interests, which don't necessarily line up. For instance, India and Brazil are not interested in putting China into a leadership position. China, for its part, does not seem interested in global dominance. It wants to maintain its own cultural and political space and be left alone within that, while maintaining a sufficient degree of international order to trade.

Then you have to factor in Trump, who is accelerating the destruction of what's left of the West. In that sense, he's hastening the shift towards a more mutli-civilisational world, where each civilisation maintains its own sphere of influence. Trump is so unpredictable that no one knows how, if at all, his program is going to add up. But the general drift is in that direction, and there certainly seems to be a strong commitment to breaking up the remnants of the Western World Order—the alliance systems, the trading systems, and all of that.

> *What options do Western nations have? How should they adapt to this*
> *new age of deep pluralism and multipolarity?*

It's clear that both the United States and Europe are facing a deep crisis. They've been running the show in one form or another for the past two centuries. That era is coming to an end, and they have no realistic prospect of regaining that kind of dominance. That's a big dislocation. For the U.S., this is especially disorienting. America's entire institutional setup—its identity even—has long rested on being the preeminent global power, the so-called "indispensable nation." But that's no longer going to be the case. Adjusting to that reality is going to be very difficult.

Could the U.S. return to its more isolationist roots? Possibly. We're already seeing signs of that in the Trumpian world. But if he wants to do outlandish things like making Canada the 51st state of America or Gaza an American enclave, then it's hard to know exactly where things are heading. This isn't a settled question.

As for Europe, the question is whether it can recover the capacity to defend itself and find an acceptable boundary with Russia. That's what the Ukraine war is about— a civilisational boundary between the Russian sphere and the European sphere. The stakes are high on both sides. Can Europe come together strongly enough to stand off Russia and absorb at least part of Ukraine into its fold? Maybe. Maybe not. I wouldn't bet heavily either way—it's an extremely difficult and consequential issue.

What is clear, though, is that neither the U.S. nor Europe can continue as they have for the last 75 years. For them, this is very disruptive. Can they reinvent themselves as one amongst equals in a multi-civilisational world order? That would mean not only tolerating but respecting cultural differences—including, say, the preference for more authoritarian systems in some societies.

I'm beginning to sound like the Chinese Foreign Ministry here. But just because they say it doesn't mean it's wrong or lacks merit. Like it or not, I think that's the direction we're headed in. How well different actors adapt to this shift will vary. And if the Chinese ever become arrogant enough to think they can take over the world, they'll pay a big price for that hubris, too. I don't think they'll go that route—but that's just my personal reading of it.

> *How has your previous thinking, such as securitisation theory,*
> *influenced the way you see global dynamics today?*

It's the wrong question, in my view. I see securitisation as a constant—it's a fundamental social mechanism. I remain a big believer in securitisation theory, but it was never my theory. It was Ole's. I only helped him develop and promote it. It's one of those big theories that applies to all times and all places. Securitisation is always at play. You can see it in families, in states, in corporations—anywhere you look. So in that sense, it hasn't transformed how I see the world today; it's more like a lens that I always have in mind, wherever I'm looking.

If there was a transformation in how I view world politics, it came earlier in my career. For more than 20 years—really up until the late 1980s or early 1990s—I was enthralled by Waltz, neorealism, polarity theory, and the likes. I was deep in the field of Strategic Studies. I found it appealing that you could use a relatively simple theoretical framing to say big things about the state of the world.

But over time, I became increasingly dissatisfied with that framework. I can't say exactly what caused the shift—it's probably too complex for a clear cause-and-effect answer— but during the 1990s, I was drawn more toward the English School and the idea of international society. Various influences pulled me in that direction, and eventually, it provided an escape from neorealism and into a more sophisticated view of global orders, one based on seeing international relations not just as a system, but as a society

or a layer of societies. For me, that was the great escape. It has redefined my vision of world order in a much more coherent way.

> *How would you apply the English school to seeing the world today, especially with regards to the cold war framing?*

BBThere are two ways of looking at it. There's the very big-picture view, which I laid out in detail in Making Global Society, published in 2023. That book places the present within a long arc of macro-historical change—essentially as part of the transition between the agrarian era and what we call modernity. Then there's a more specific and immediate angle, which is something I'm actively thinking through right now. The key question I'm wrestling with isWhat kind of international or global society will emerge?

This is entirely new territory. We've had multiple civilisations in the past, but they were not closely interwoven with each other. We've had periods where one civilisation dominated all the others. But we've never had several major civilisations that are both deeply interconnected and also determined to be separate. What kind of international society can accommodate that order? That's a really interesting and big question that I'm working on.

A sub-theme of that is that the politics of this emerging new civilisational order are fairly right-wing, sharing many qualities with fascism. Whether one can call them—Trump and the Republican Party—fascist is a separate, interesting question. The Fuhrer principle, the Big Lie, and racism are all there, but these features also existed in communism. Still, it seems clear to me that the contemporary right is driving many of the big ideas and myths of our time. One has to look through that filter—what is their grand narrative, and what kind of international and global society does that grand narrative enable? It's unfolding right in front of us, but that makes it difficult to see clearly. But that would be my starting point.

Jennifer Lind

Interview By Brian Kot

In February, STAIR's Managing Editor spoke with Jennifer Lind, associate professor of government at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, a faculty associate at the Reischauer Institute for Japanese Studies at Harvard University, and a fellow at Chatham House. An expert on the international relations of East Asia and US foreign policy toward the region, she spoke about her International Security article, "Back to Bipolarity: How China's Rise Transformed the Balance of Power," in which she argues that the current international system is bipolar, with the United States and China as the leading superpowers. This interview explores the concept of polarity in greater depth, along with the similarities and differences between the Cold War and today's international system. Read in dialogue with the interview with Professor Barry Buzan in this issue, Professor Lind presents the case against drawing simplistic comparisons between contemporary international politics and the Cold War, and instead prefers analytic concepts like polarity. This conversation was edited for clarity.

What's the research motivation behind your recent International Security article? Why is it important to study polarity? Why did you choose to research this topic at this particular moment?

Political scientists believe that polarity is important for driving the nature or character of international politics. To understand the nature of international politics, it's important to know what sort of system we are in—unipolar, multipolar, or bipolar.

There's been a big debate about whether the international system is changing. I felt it was important to have better tools for that debate, since much of it seemed overly impressionistic. One person might define a great power using one set of metrics, while someone else might propose entirely different criteria. In policy and media circles, there's hardly any systematic conversation on this issue. Among scholars, the discussion is more structured, but still lacks consensus. Debates often center on which metrics to use, and the conversation frequently becomes more philosophical rather than focusing on practical applications.

What I saw was that the U.S.-led unipolar system we had had for the past few decades seemed to be shifting—especially as other powers, like China, became more influential—but people in academia, the media, and the policy world were debating about what exactly was happening. Some argued that we're in a multipolar world now. Others—like a prominent school of thought led by some of my Dartmouth colleagues—said no, the U.S. is still the dominant, unipolar power. And then others argued we're in a bipolar

system. So basically, people were looking at the same system and coming to completely different conclusions—unipolar, multipolar, or bipolar. That's not a helpful conclusion.

This matters because each system brings different risks and points to different policy directions. I wanted to contribute by creating a method to measure and compare national power—something that could offer more clarity about the kind of system we're in.

> *STAIR: Can you summarise your method for measuring polarity? How does it differ from previous approaches? And why is it more accurate for measuring capabilities in the international system?*

There's a huge debate among scholars about what power is and what defines a great power. There are so many books and articles on this topic. Typically, somebody will write an article saying, "here's a new dimension of power everyone's missed," and so we just keep adding more and more dimensions to the definition of power.

I went a completely different direction. I used an inductive method. I didn't even offer a definition of power or great power. There's this surprising phenomenon in our field: on the one hand, people do not agree on what power is or how to measure it. But on the other hand, if you look at historical systems, there's actually tremendous consensus on who the great powers were at a given time. That's striking because it suggests that maybe we do know what power and great power are, even if we don't have a consensus on a formal definition.

I took the views of scholars as a kind of "ground truth". This approach was first pursued by J. David Singer and his colleagues in the Correlates of War dataset. They asked scholars and historians, "Who were the great powers across these given historical systems?" They found that, firstly, scholars delineated the historical systems in a similar way. The Cold War, for example, is generally considered to have spanned from 1950 to 1990. Secondly, although these scholars probably held different definitions of power, they came to similar conclusions about what the great powers were during those given systems.

I took that list as ground truth and used it as a baseline. I then applied a set of common metrics that IR scholars use to measure power and assess how much power each great power had relative to the leading state at a given time. For example, how did Australia's GDP in the 19th century compare to Great Britain's, which was the leading state on a variety of these metrics?

This inductive method allows me to establish a rough threshold for how much power a state needs, relative to the leading state, to be considered a great power. This is really important because in academic and policy circles, we've been debating, "Is China a great power?" or "Is China declining or still rising?" You can't answer these questions unless you have a threshold for great power.

> *In your view, how, if at all, does the concept of polarity relate to how we understand the Cold War? To what extent is the Cold War equivalent to bipolarity between the United States and the Soviet Union?*

I think people assign different meanings to the term "Cold War". For clarity, I prefer the term "bipolarity". The Cold War was a bipolar superpower competition, particularly in military terms. The data I provide in my article shows that, according to economic metrics, many countries were above the threshold for being considered great powers. But only the U.S. and the Soviet Union had both the economic and military capabilities that put them in the range of superpowers. That made it a bipolar system.

China, for example, amassed significant military power at that time, but it was incredibly weak economically. European powers like Britain, France, and West Germany had the economic side, but they didn't mobilise their wealth to become great military powers. So, using my method, we can see that the Cold War was a bipolar system, which jibes with what scholars have said all along.

Now, when we look at the system today, we see something similar. A handful of countries have significant economic power, but only two—the U.S. and China—have both sufficient economic and military power. So, we're no longer in a unipolar world. We've entered a new bipolar system.

A lot of people resist calling today's system a new Cold War because the phrase "Cold War" evokes things beyond just polarity. That's why I don't find it a useful term because the type of superpower that we're facing today is very different than the superpower the U.S. faced during the late 20th century. A lot of those conditions don't apply anymore.

For example, the U.S. faced a superpower competitor that was outside the global economic system built by the U.S. and its partners after World War II. The Soviets had their own bloc, while today, China is integrated into that system and is a major trading partner for the U.S. and its allies. This creates a unique challenge—how do you contain or isolate a great power that's also your major trading partner and that of your partners and allies?

Another key difference is in technology. Many people think the Soviet Union was technologically weak, but that's not true. In the 1950s, the Soviets were cutting-edge in many areas—think Sputnik, Nobel Prizes, and major scientific advances. But the Soviets squandered all that amazing human capital with a highly dysfunctional economic system that concentrated technological capabilities in the military rather than the commercial sector. The problem was that their economic system stifled the diffusion of these innovations. They focused their technological capabilities on military applications, rather than the commercial sector, which limited their economic potential. Jeffrey Ding, one of your program's alumni, who's now at George Washington University, explores this theme in depth in his excellent book.

In sum, I think the phrase "New Cold War" is a bit problematic, because we're not really returning to anything. Although we are indeed returning to bipolarity, the superpower competition we face today is so different.

> *Focusing on the role of technology, you recently co-authored a paper with Professor Michael Mastandunno on the lessons of the Cold War-era Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls*

(COCOM). What are the key insights emerging from that research, and how does that inform our current thinking about U.S. technological competition with China?

In this study with Professor Mastanduno, we wanted to revisit the COCOM regime—the technology control system that the U.S. and its partners used to restrict tech exports to the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries. Our goal was to see whether we could apply lessons from that experience to today's efforts.

So when the Biden administration announced sweeping export controls against China, I immediately thought of Professor Mastanduno—he literally wrote the book on COCOM, which was a similar initiative.

Now, of course, the context is different. The current regime is less formalised, and today's geopolitical environment is not the Cold War. But there are still meaningful parallels: in both cases, the U.S. is trying to limit the flow of critical technologies to a strategic competitor due to concerns about their military applications.

The U.S. is also trying to bring key partners on board—like Japan, the Netherlands, South Korea, and Taiwan—who are all critical players in the semiconductor supply chain. So I roped Professor Mastanduno into this project because of his expertise, and together we looked at the challenges COCOM faced and asked: Are today's efforts vulnerable to similar issues? And are there new challenges that might be even more serious?

We found three key lessons. First, the export control strategy was described as a "small yard, high fence." That means restricting only a narrow set of cutting-edge technologies (the small yard), while enforcing those restrictions rigorously (the high fence).

There's a clear benefit to keeping the yard small: the more focused the controls, the more likely U.S. allies will stay on board. Many of these countries—like the Netherlands, Japan, and South Korea—are major trading partners of China. They don't want to fully decouple. The gap in threat perception further hinders the coalition's cohesion. The U.S. is far more alarmed by China, even anticipating a potential military conflict. Other countries—particularly in Europe, but also South Korea—don't share that same level of concern. And because trade makes up a larger share of their GDP compared to the U.S., they're also more exposed economically.

However, while the policy was framed as a "small yard," in practice, we saw in the COCOM era that the yard tends to expand over time, due to political pressure, shifting priorities, and bureaucratic dynamics. Washington is deeply concerned about China's Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) strategy, which deliberately blurs the lines between commercial and military sectors. This makes it very difficult to separate civilian technologies from potential military applications. When members of Congress grilled the Biden administration, they often asked: "Isn't this commercial technology going to end up in China's military? What happens if we go to war?" So, the line between commercial and military use is increasingly hard to define.

There's also a tendency for U.S. leaders to reach for export controls to address issues beyond military competition. While the administration has framed the policy as a "small yard, high fence"—meaning only narrowly defined, cutting-edge technologies are restricted—we've seen export controls used in other areas, too, like human rights or domestic repression. That's a problem, because this is a multilateral effort. U.S. allies may not share the same priorities. They might agree with concerns about China's military rise, but not with using export controls as a tool for human rights advocacy. That disagreement can strain coordination.

So our first major finding is that even if you start with a small yard, it tends to grow, due to domestic political pressure, blurred lines between civilian and military uses, and the temptation to use export controls for multiple policy goals.

Our second finding has to do with the "high fence." In theory, the fence is supposed to be strong enough to keep sensitive technologies out of China. But just like the Soviets in the past, China has found creative and effective ways to acquire what it wants.

They're not always getting things in the quantities they'd prefer, and some items—like massive extreme ultraviolet lithography (EUV) machines, which are the size of a building—are simply not smuggleable. But overall, they're still able to get a lot. And the Chinese—unlike the Soviets—are able to do a lot with it, and (as the case of DeepSeek showed) to innovate in response to scarcity. So the fence is not as high as U.S. policymakers might hope, and China is a more adaptable adversary than was the USSR.

Our third and final point relates to alliance management. During the COCOM era, coordinating with allies on what to control, which firms to blacklist, and how to enforce those rules was a major challenge. Even back then, when the Soviet threat was very clear and immediate, there were serious disagreements about how far to go with controls.

The situation now is even more difficult. China is deeply embedded in the global economy. Many allies don't view it as an imminent military threat and aren't willing to make big sacrifices to contain it. So disagreements about the scope and enforcement of export controls are already straining U.S. relations with allies, and that's happening at a time when those relationships are crucial and already under stress.

> *East Asian security is another area of your expertise. How did the Cold War shape the security dynamics in the region? What are the benefits and drawbacks of viewing East Asia through a Cold War framing?*

I think the best way to frame this is by talking about superpower competition and what that means for politics and economics in the region. We're entering a new era of intense rivalry, what we'd call bipolarity, where two major powers are extremely jealous of each other's gains.

Think about the Cold War: the U.S. and the Soviet Union competed for influence all over the world—Latin America, Africa, the Middle East. That competition wasn't just about politics; it often led to military entrenchment, like bases and alliances, which amplified power projection.

We're starting to see that same pattern emerge today in places like the Pacific Islands. If you're wondering why there's suddenly so much interest in that region, it's because it's becoming a new arena for U.S.-China competition. It's all about strategic geography—air bases, naval access, and the ability to project power across the Indo-Pacific.

Another key region is Southeast Asia. With the exception of a few countries—like the Philippines, a U.S. treaty ally, or Cambodia, which leans strongly toward China—most of these countries are hedging. They're caught between the two superpowers, trying to balance relations with both powers and avoid choosing sides.

But here's the thing: in a bipolar world, that balancing act gets harder. When you talk to officials from these countries, they often say, "Please don't make us choose." But history suggests that during great power rivalry, countries are often forced to choose whether they want to or not. And unfortunately, it can be a very destabilising process—sometimes even violent.

We hope that this new era of U.S.-China competition won't follow that same path. It's actually a great research question for students at your university and others: What might make today's bipolarity different? Could China avoid using force or political interference in the ways the superpowers did during the Cold War? I certainly hope things will be different. But what we do know is that this new era is going to be highly competitive.

BOOK REVIEWS

Bronwen Everill. *Africonomics: A History of Western Ignorance.* William Collins Books, 2024. 978-0008581152

Osarumen Iluobe

No one reading Africonomics: A History of Western Ignorance will come away uncertain about its argument. Ranging across centuries, Bronwen Everill confronts the intellectual habits that have shaped how Africa has been imagined, managed, and misunderstood. This is a history of misrecognition, charting the ways in which European and American thinkers, traders, and policymakers imposed economic assumptions that obscured the realities of African agency. The result is not only a challenge to orthodox development thinking, but a sweeping indictment of the epistemologies that continue to govern North-South engagement.

At its core, Africonomics makes a simple but unsettling claim: Western ignorance is not an episodic failure, but a structural and enduring feature of how Africa has been imagined, intervened upon, and misapprehended. Everill excavates this continuity across more than two centuries of economic thought and social action, arguing that the paternalism of 19th-century abolitionists and the metrics of 21st-century technocrats are linked less by their differences than by their shared disregard for African epistemologies. This is not an easy thesis to sustain over time and across geographies, yet Everill does so with scholarly discipline and rhetorical flair.

The book opens with a deft treatment of abolitionist misunderstandings of wealth in African societies. Far from reducing Africans to the caricature of subsistence traders beguiled by trifles, Everill emphasises the relational nature of wealth in many precolonial settings. Their treatment of "wealth in people" is not novel in itself, but Everill uses a comparative framing, particularly with Victorian Britain, which gives the argument fresh resonance. In both societies, social ties, patronage, and dependency networks served as vital instruments for status and accumulation. That many abolitionists failed to appreciate this parallel is indicative not only of their cultural blinkers but of the broader failure of liberal humanitarianism to reckon with its own ideological premises.

In the chapters that follow, the tone sharpens. Ignorance becomes more than a benign absence of knowledge; it becomes an alibi for domination. European assessments of

African labour, especially the trope of idleness, are shown to have had devastating material consequences. The idea that Africans were incapable of organised agricultural production justified intrusive labour regimes and informed a series of miscalculations. This phenomenon was most notable in Nigeria, where Lord Lugard's efforts to subsume the Sokoto Caliphate into a broader imperial economy rested on little understanding of its internal structure. The result was not modernisation but disruption, affecting labour markets, land tenure systems, and political legitimacy.

Everill's treatment of monetary history is one of the book's most compelling sections. In the hands of the author, the cowrie shell ceases to be an ethnographic curiosity and becomes a deeply functional medium of exchange, embedded in ritual, militarism, and credit. European critiques of African trade systems, particularly the notion that Africans foolishly exchanged slaves for baubles, are reinterpreted not as errors of calculation but as errors of comprehension. This chapter, in particular, exemplifies Everill's strength. Namely, the ability to move between microhistorical anecdote and macrohistorical argument, without losing sight of either.

Yet if the historical chapters offer confident and well-evidenced reinterpretations, the book's treatment of the post-independence period raises more complex issues. Everill is on firm ground when critiquing the technocratic optimism of recent decades, ranging from microfinance and mobile money to the more fashionable strains of Effective Altruism. Everill's argument that these initiatives reproduce the same dynamic of external imposition under a new moral grammar is persuasive. But at times, the analogy between past and present appears to be overdone. Chapter 7's comparison of the rise of microfinance and cryptocurrency in Africa with the MMM Ponzi scheme of the 1990s is a case in point. According to Everill, their similarities lie in the extent to which they "all appeal to the idea that through pure hustle and hard work, through mobilizing social networks and by having access to start-up capital – especially start-up capital that comes from those who trust your business sense – people will be able to propel themselves into a higher standard of living." While the crypto-craze and microfinance initiatives undeniably stem from economic precarity, the former is also embedded in global discourses of monetary sovereignty and decentralised finance that are not wholly reducible to desperation or illusion. In flattening the motivations of African cryptocurrency users to a single explanatory register, Everill risks undermining the pluralism she otherwise defends.

Similarly, Chapter 8 verges on conflating the critique of ignorance with a more general condemnation of what may be referred to as 'economic imperialism'. While rhetorically potent, it lacks the historical specificity that characterises the rest of the book. The insinuation that the economisation of social life is a uniquely African burden, or one disproportionately inflicted by Western economists, overlooks both global trends and endogenous African actors who have actively engaged with economic rationalities in strategic and selective ways.

Still, these are quibbles set against a work of real intellectual ambition. Africonomics is not a comprehensive history of African economies. It is, rather, a genealogical interrogation of how Africa has been misunderstood from the outside. In doing so,

the book sheds light not only on Western misapprehensions but on the institutional machinery that has allowed such misapprehensions to flourish, including development banks, foreign ministries, NGOs, and universities.

What makes this book valuable is not simply its indictment of past failures, but its invitation to reimagine how knowledge itself is produced and circulated. In an era of renewed geopolitical competition on the African continent, where China, the United States, and Gulf states now jostle for influence, Everill's call for epistemic humility is both timely and essential. Whether this book will fundamentally alter development practice is unclear. But it will, one hopes, compel historians and policymakers alike to confront a basic truth that Africa has been over-interpreted, under-consulted, and seldom taken on its own terms.

Anne Applebaum. *Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World.* London: Allen Lane, 2024. 978-0385549936

Dominik Rubes

What binds the regimes in Russia, China, and Iran, as well as other places like Venezuela or North Korea, together? Not enough for us to consider them a unified global alliance or axis, but enough to speak of a new worrisome phenomenon, Anne Applebaum argues in her latest book. Putin's kleptocratic circle, the Chinese Communist Party, the theocrats in Tehran, self-proclaimed socialist Maduro, and the deified dictator on the Korean Peninsula can hardly be said to constitute a coherent ideological block akin to the Soviet empire that was the main antagonist to the West in the Cold War. Still, these and other authoritarian regimes have gradually formed an interconnected network to protect their leaders' hold on power and project influence on the global stage. Sharing "a ruthless, single-minded determination to preserve their personal wealth and power" (p. 2) and, consequently, a common enemy—democratic and liberal ideas and those who defend them—modern autocrats in Applebaum's account operate "like an agglomeration of companies" (p. 2): striking deals, coordinating actions and narratives, and sharing resources to attack liberal democratic norms globally and to withstand both external and internal challenges to their rule—a phenomenon that she terms Autocracy, Inc.

The primary contribution of this short, just over 200-page, book lies in providing a solid account of the workings of Autocracy, Inc. Throughout the book, but particularly in Chapters 1 and 2, Applebaum recounts how autocratic regimes survive Western sanctions by turning to the vast network of their peers for support, with Russia, China and Iran often being the most important, though far from the only, sources of assistance. The help can come in many forms, such as trade and investment deals, the provision of surveillance technology, military personnel, propaganda services, political support, and advice on how to handle opposition. This is how rulers such as Lukashenko in Belarus or Maduro in Venezuela remain in power. As Emmerson Mnangagwa, Mugabe's successor in the presidential office in Zimbabwe and a comrade of Vladimir Putin, put it: "The victims of sanctions must cooperate" (p. 64). Extreme cases of this phenomenon can be found in certain African countries such as Mali or the Central African Republic.

There, Russia's Wagner Group effectively offered a "regime survival package" (p. 120), including mercenary forces and propaganda campaigns, to local rulers in exchange for economic deals, as described by the Royal United Services Institute.[1]

Chapter 3 unpacks Autocarcy, Inc.'s propaganda machine and its global reach. Whether in Africa, Latin America, or Asia, vast networks of media controlled from Moscow, Beijing, or Tehran spread anti-Western narratives and topics professionally tailored to different audiences across the globe. Russian state media, for example, regularly portray the West as decadent and in a state of chaotic decay and Russia as a protector of traditional family and Christian values, forced to defend civilisation by fighting neo-Nazis in Ukraine. As detailed in Chapter 4, hiding under the notions of protecting "sovereignty", promoting global "multipolarity", or pushing against "Western imperialism", Russia and China also work relentlessly to build coalitions to erase the language of human rights and democracy from international treaties and documents. Chapter 5, in turn, describes the templates of smear campaigns, legal investigations, and targeted violence that autocratic regimes today rely on to intimidate and discredit domestic opposition. For example, democratic opposition advocates are routinely described as foreign agents, which may lead to their formal investigations and arrests.

Applebaum is careful not to overstate her thesis. It is not only the ideological (as well as geographical and cultural) heterogeneity of the members of Autocracy Inc. that leads her to reject simplified narratives of a New Cold War or a struggle between autocratic and democratic countries. She also argues that some autocratic regimes do not fit her concept since they are much more cooperative with the Western world, such as "the U.A.E., Saudi Arabia, Singapore [or] Vietnam" (p. 158), just as there are illiberal regimes in "Turkey, Singapore, India, the Philippines, Hungary—which sometimes align with the democratic world and sometimes don't" (p. 2). Her concept applies primarily to "the strongmen who lead Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Angola, Myanmar, Cuba, Syria, Zimbabwe, Mali, Belarus, Sudan, Azerbaijan, and perhaps three dozen others" (p. 2). As such, the concept's scope conditions are somewhat open-ended. The book's intention is not to categorise exactly who belongs to this geopolitical corporate network. It is to put a spotlight on the systems and practices on which modern autocrats rely and through which they grow increasingly emboldened.

Another layer of complexity that Applebaum highlights is that "the divisions run inside countries, too" (p. 158). On the one hand, she writes about the domestic opposition in many authoritarian countries—its continued fight in the face of often brutal suppression. In the Epilogue, she recalls the meeting of the World Liberty Congress in 2022, which united democratic opposition from all around the world. "To them, Autocracy, Inc., isn't a book title: it's a reality that they grapple with every day. By sharing experiences, they learn to understand the patterns, to anticipate the tactics that will be used against them, and to prepare to resist them" (p. 153). It is clear from Applebaum's writing that she draws much inspiration from these people. The book's dedication, "For the optimists", may be seen as a reference not least to those who still resist Autocracy, Inc. from within, despite the developments that the book describes.

On the other hand, Applebaum does not let the reader forget that there are illiberal and quasi-authoritarian tendencies and corruption in the West itself, echoing her previous book, the Twilight of Democracy, which tackles this topic at length.[2] She begins Autocracy, Inc. with a chapter criticising the greed of many Western financial institutions and the loopholes in the global financial system that allow oligarchs, criminals, and autocrats of the world to launder their dirty money. In the Epilogue, Applebaum calls for less political naivety and more coordination among democratic forces in dealing with the autocrats. This should include continuing to cut dangerous economic dependencies on adversarial regimes, supporting trustworthy media organisations that push back against authoritarian propaganda, and coordinating a reform of the global financial system. Ultimately, Applebaum writes that we are witnessing not a fight between democratic and autocratic state-based blocks but a struggle between democratic and "autocratic behaviors, wherever they are found: in Russia, in China, in Europe, in the United States" (p. 159).

Many of the points above will sound familiar to close followers of international politics. Indeed, the book largely grew out of Applebaum's articles in The Atlantic and elsewhere. Thus, those who frequent her writing should be cautioned not to expect a novel contribution but rather a succinct summary of her main points. Similarly, the book is deliberately brief, and those interested in an in-depth analysis of some of the phenomena Applebaum describes will have to consult other sources (some of which she references in the book), such as Oliver Bullough's Moneyland or Tom Burgis' Kleptopia on the topic of kleptocratic global financial networks.[3]

Another point of caution is for those expecting an intricate theorisation of Autocracy, Inc.. Applebaum sets out to highlight a phenomenon with the help of a catchy label, which is reflected in her writing style, in line with her background in history and journalism rather than political science. Her book does not provide a holistic theoretical framework for interpreting today's geopolitics, predicting the future, or offering a deep analysis of all the factors that sustain modern autocratic regimes, which academic scholars may expect. Nonetheless, understanding the nature of Autocracy, Inc., Applebaum would posit, allows us to better interpret and analyse the behaviour of its members because it is often coordinated.

"The autocracies keep track of one another's defeats and victories, timing their own moves to create maximum chaos" (p. 155), she writes. In Ukraine, for example, the democratic West is not fighting just Russia but Autocracy, Inc.—facing an attack "not only to acquire territory but also to show the world that the old rules of international behaviour no longer hold" (p. 13). The attack was launched from Moscow but was supported more or less directly from capitals all over the autocratic network. This was written before North Korean troops, not just weapons, physically entered Ukraine to fight alongside Russia, underscoring this point.[4]

Applebaum's book ultimately serves as both a warning and a case against cynicism. Despite the book's attention to nuance, Applebaum is characteristically unambiguous when it comes to describing the corrupt, autocratic forces in the world and the open hostility they adopt towards their shared enemy: "That enemy is us", she writes. "To

be more precise, that enemy is the democratic world, 'the West,' NATO, the European Union, their own, internal democratic opponents, and the liberal ideas that inspire all of them" (p. 10). The book is a timely call for us in the democratic West to clearly define the threats we face, just as the autocrats do. Moreover, like the internal democratic opponents of tyrannical regimes, we must realise that although "[t]here is no liberal world order anymore" (p. 175), there are still values, norms, and institutions that are worth our unapologetic defence.

Notes

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2. J A. Applebaum, Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism. New York City: Doubleday, 2020.

3. T. Burgis, Kleptopia: How Dirty Money Is Conquering the World. New York City: Harper, 2020. O. Bullough, Moneyland: Why Thieves And Crooks Now Rule The World And How To Take It Back. London: Profile Books, 2018.

4. J. Kim and J. Lee, "North Korea troops have joined Ukraine war battles as part of Russian units, Seoul says," Reuters, Nov. 20, 2024. [Online]. Available: https://www.reuters.com/world/north-korea-troops-participated-some-ukraine-war-battles-part-russian-units-2024-11-20/

Chris Miller. *Chip War: The Fight for the World's Most Critical Technology.* New York: Scribner, 2022. 978-1398504097

Paul M. Squatrito

Chris Miller's Chip War: The Fight for the World's Most Critical Technology argues that control over semiconductors now shapes economic strength and military power. He follows the semiconductor supply chain from U.S. design software and Nvidia's leading AI chips, to a single Dutch supplier of extreme-ultraviolet tools, and to Taiwan's semiconductor fabrication plants (fabs) that produce most leading-edge logic chips. The book highlights the immense capital required to compete in this critical technology—a state-of-the-art plant can cost over $20 billion—and the critical role of government policy. As Miller illustrates, export controls, China's massive subsidies, and U.S. alliances with Japan, South Korea, the Netherlands, and Taiwan are just as important to the industry as technical expertise or economic might. He connects the industry's booms and busts to today's race for AI, 5G, and smart weapons, providing a clear, concrete map of the chokepoints, players, and high stakes that define the 21st century.

The following review highlights the book's key arguments, strengths, and areas for further exploration. As an associate professor of international history at Tufts University's Fletcher School, Miller presents a concise, historically grounded account of semiconductor supply chains and the current competition between the United States and China. Chip War offers a clear analysis of the link between technology and international politics, providing practical insights for scholars, policymakers, and general readers. The book's success, winning the 2022 Financial Times Business Book of the Year and becoming a New York Times bestseller, signals its broad appeal beyond tech circles.

The Semiconductor's Global Journey

Miller begins by chronicling the rise of the semiconductor industry from its Cold War origins in Silicon Valley to its current global ubiquity. Early breakthroughs by U.S. companies like Intel and Texas Instruments laid the groundwork for a technological revolution. Later, military contracts spurred further innovation, embedding semiconductors at the heart of computing, communication, and national defence.[1]

As chip technology evolved, so did its production. Miller explains how Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan emerged as dominant players by the late 20th century, challenging U.S. leadership. Today, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) produces more than half of the world's advanced chips, underscoring Taiwan's central role in global supply chains.[2] Yet, this concentration creates vulnerabilities. A conflict involving Taiwan, especially with China, could disrupt semiconductor production, destabilising economies worldwide.[3]

Miller excels in making concepts like Moore's Law tangible, taking the reader inside the manufacturing process. He describes engineers meticulously aligning mirrors inside a bus-sized extreme ultraviolet (EUV) lithography machine, where a laser strikes a stream of tin droplets to create short-wavelength light necessary to etch features measured in mere nanometres. He pairs the physics of this process with the economic realities of modern semiconductor fabrication. A top-tier fab now costs more than an aircraft carrier, draws on thousands of suppliers, and run on thin margins, where a single percentage point can decide a company's profits and market leadership. This economic reality directly influences national policy, from U.S. subsidies to Dutch export rules and Taiwan's manufacturing focus. The narrative unfolds like a relay race, moving from lab to factory and into government cabinet rooms, all driven by the same pressure to increase transistor counts.

Semiconductors and the U.S.-China Rivalry

Miller argues that semiconductors are a central battleground in the U.S.–China contest for power. Chips are more than mere commodities; they are strategic assets, making fabs, tools, and design a matter of national security. China's reliance on foreign lithography, electronic design automation (EDA) software, and leading-node processors becomes a key pressure point as leaders push for technological dominance.[4]

In response, Beijing has invested billions of U.S. dollars into its domestic semiconductor industry, aiming for self-sufficiency. However, Miller notes that China faces steep hurdles: it lacks the sophisticated equipment and expertise needed for producing cutting-edge chips.[5] Another major vulnerability for China is chip design software. Miller introduces EDA as the essential toolchain for drawing and verifying transistor layouts at the nanometre scale; without it, it's impossible to produce modern chips. Three firms— Synopsys, Cadence, and Siemens—dominate the EDA market, giving their home countries outsized control over who can design and build advanced processors.

Miller shows a two-track U.S. strategy to hold the lead. One track funds capacity and research at home. The CHIPS Act of 2022 puts $52 billion into domestic fabs, labs, and the workforce, with guardrails blocking subsidised firms from expanding advanced lines in China. The other track involves China's progress by controlling access to key tools. For example, the Netherlands-based ASML holds a global monopoly on EUV lithography machines, which use 13.5-nanometer light to print the smallest features on a chip. The United States has coordinated with the Dutch government to restrict EUV machine export to keep leading-edge nodes out of competitors' reach.[6] Moreover, Washington coordinates with allies to target Chinese firms like Huawei, cutting off their access to leading-edge chips, EDA software, and other advanced tools. Both tracks serve

one goal: secure supply chains and stay a step ahead in design and production.[7]

This rivalry looks like a new arms race, with chips instead of missiles. Miller connects the fight over lithography, fabs, and design to alliances, trade rules, and military planning. Export controls bind the United States to partners in the Netherlands and Japan, while concerns over Taiwan's fabs shape strategy and logistics. As today's defence doctrines are increasingly centred around precision weapons and AI powered by advanced semiconductors, Miller argues, "[t]he rivalry between the United States and China may well be determined by computing power."

Economic and Security Risks

Beyond geopolitics, Miller details the economic and security risks of semiconductor dependency. Since chips power consumer tech and advanced defense systems, dependency becomes a strategic liability. Nations that control production also control access to military advantage and innovation across many sectors of the economy.[8] This logic is driving policy choices on both sides of the Pacific.

The COVID-19 pandemic then stress-tested this system. Shortages from 2020 onward stalled assembly lines for everything from automobiles to medical devices and electronics. These cascading delays exposed fragile links in global logistics and supplier networks: because leading-edge fabrication is clustered in East Asia, regional instability in Taiwan, South Korea, or coastal China could have sweeping global consequences.[9] In response, the United States, Europe, and Japan are funding new fabs and research hubs. Diversification, however, requires large capital, skilled labor, and time.[10] Until new capacity arrives, supply remains vulnerable to shocks from natural disasters, trade disputes, or conflict.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

Chris Miller's Chip War is a sharp and urgent analysis of the semiconductor industry's role in shaping global power. By examining the history and geopolitics of chips, Miller illuminates why they are not just technological components but strategic resources that define economic and military strength. As the U.S. and its allies work to secure their supply chains and China pushes for self-reliance, the stakes of this competition continue to rise. Miller's work offers crucial insights into how this race will shape international relations and the global economy.

More importantly, the book is not merely an account of the past or present. It is a call to recognise the fragility of the systems we rely on and to act decisively to mitigate risks. In doing so, Chip War challenges readers to confront the far-reaching implications of the world's dependency on semiconductors—and to consider what must change to secure a more stable and resilient future.

Despite its compelling illustration of semiconductors' geopolitical importance, the book leaves some areas underexplored. While Miller thoroughly examines the U.S. and China, he devotes less attention to other rising players, such as the European Union (EU) and India, which are increasingly investing in semiconductor production and could shape the industry's future.[11] He also briefly mentions the environmental costs

of chip production, but does not fully address the implications of its energy-intensive nature—a dimension that deserves greater analysis given with global concerns about climate change.