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INTERVIEW

The Erosion of NATO's Moral Centre:
An Interview with Laurien Crump

Midas van de Weetering

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Randy de Jong

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Dear reader,

The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.

— Antonio Gramsci

Few quotes capture the turbulence of historical transition as vividly as these words attributed to the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci. They were written in his *Prison Notebooks*, following his imprisonment by the Mussolini regime in 1926. The words were written in a time when the old 19th-century political and capitalist order had been undermined after WW1, and gave way to a chaotic period where alternative visions for the world, like Fascism and Stalinism, competed for influence. These and other ills were the monsters, or more accurately translated ‘morbid symptoms’, Gramsci mentions.

It is perhaps no surprise that this specific quote has seen a rise in usage recently; our times do resemble Gramsci’s. With the collapse of the USSR, the US remained as the world’s sole superpower, a period often described as the *unipolar moment*. During this period, geopolitics was defined by an axis of relative Western, mainly American, dominance. As liberal democratic institutions expanded across the world, the international economy became increasingly globalized. And to many, it seemed a US-supported rules-based international order would provide the framework for a stable and cooperative international system. This was perhaps most clearly articulated by Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History*. He argued the ideological conflict of Gramsci’s time was a thing of the past, and democracy and market capitalism would be the world’s final form of political organization.

Now in 2026, these ideas seem well and truly out of time. Globalization, always a process with winners and losers, has started the reverse, as global democracy is in retreat. Western dominance is also fraying. China has emerged as a formidable economic and strategic rival to the US, Russia has returned to an assertive geopolitical posture, and regional powers across the world are asserting their own ambitions in a more contested international system. Meanwhile, international institutions like the UN are under increased pressure in this fragmented environment. Even within the US itself, the adherents of the old system have been replaced by Trumpism, arguably one of the ‘morbid symptoms’ of our time. History, if ever it stopped, has certainly restarted.

As such, today we are watching the old-world order die while the new one struggles to be born. In a way, this process can be described as the turning of a kaleidoscope. For a time, the pattern appeared relatively stable, defined by Western and American dominance. As the unipolar structure fades, new geopolitical dynamics are crystallizing in its place: the resurgence of regional power politics, intensifying debates over strategic autonomy, and mounting pressure on international institutions and norms, not least those governing nuclear non-proliferation. As the unipolar order continues to fragment, this rearrangement will continue until a new pattern eventually emerges, whatever that may look like.

The goal of this issue of GA! Magazine is to provide insight into this process of rearrangement. It examines how the fragmentation of the unipolar moment is simultaneously eroding the institutions of the old order and generating new geopolitical dynamics.

The issue opens with an interview with historian Laurien Crump, who reflects on the erosion of NATO and the implications this has for the Transatlantic alliance and Europe’s global position. This is followed by Dirk Focking’s analysis of nuclear sharing, exploring how it has historically been used to further non-proliferation and what lessons this history offers for today’s increasingly complex nuclear landscape.

Zooming out to a global perspective, Maximilian Schlenker argues that the weakening of global governance is giving rise to new regional spheres of influence as alternative structures of cooperation, charting the return of regionalism in a fragmenting world order.

The changing dynamics of global power are further explored through Hansung Ryu's analysis of Sino-Japanese relations, which highlights how historical memory, alliance structures, and debates over strategic autonomy continue to shape geopolitical tensions in East Asia. In a similar vein, Midas van de Weetering's study of Rwanda analyzes how this small state has used narrative framing strategies to gain status and expand its influence, focusing on its relationship with the UK. Focusing more on policy, William Piras analyzes US influence in South Korea, examining the history of this alliance and how the changing US strategy under Trump influences it. Another article on the South China Sea arbitration case then examines how China's construction of artificial islands challenges international law and raises broader questions about the effectiveness of international institutions in today's changing world.

The issue also includes an interview with historian Paschalis Pechlivanis, who discusses if the Balkans have historically functioned as a microcosm of great-power competition and connects this with current geopolitics in the region. Finally, Randy de Jong's article on Indonesia explores its role as a middle power, showing how it balances between competing Great Powers while drawing on the legacy of the 'Bandung spirit'.

Together, these contributions show how the fragmentation of the unipolar moment is quickly reshaping global politics across various regions and levels of analysis, providing a multifaceted perspective on a world that is living in the interim.

MIDAS VAN DE WEETERING -
Publication Director



VICTOR BIET -
Publication Assistant

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THE EROSION OF NATO'S MORAL CENTRE?

AN INTERVIEW WITH LAURIEN CRUMP

This interview, conducted by Midas van de Weetering in February 2026, features insights from Dr. Laurien Crump, a historian of international relations and European security. She is a researcher at the Centre for Parliamentary History at Radboud University and previously worked at Utrecht University in the History of International Relations field. Her research focuses on Cold War multilateral diplomacy and European security, including the Warsaw Pact and the post-Cold War transatlantic security architecture such as NATO enlargement.

It is often talked about that the rules of the game have changed essentially since the 90s, with the undermining of the international relations playbook. Can President Trump's threat of annexing Greenland or intervention in Venezuela be viewed as the most clear example of the changing world order?

Absolutely. The illegal capture of President Maduro, whatever you think of Maduro, goes right against international law while completely bypassing the United Nations. However, I think that Trump's claims on Greenland are an absolute watershed. As we speak today [2nd of February], because with Trump, it can change every day. As we speak, it looks as though he's not going to invade Greenland in the short term, but the mere fact that an American president threatens to invade part of a NATO country is unprecedented, and I think signals the end of NATO as we know it. I mean, Article 1 of NATO is all about values, it's about international justice, about peace, about the United Nations, but it's also about neither threatening with force nor using force. By threatening the use of force against Greenland, Trump has already greatly undermined article one of NATO. I also think he's undermined a lot of it already by the way he deals with Putin, as it also goes against international justice. So I think you hear a lot of people asking questions about whether this is the end of NATO or not. I don't think the end of NATO is near, but I think NATO has already been eroded, as we're now dealing with a

completely different NATO from a year ago. The biggest and scariest difference is that it doesn't have a moral foundation anymore, an even scarier thought considering the ongoing genocide in Gaza and a war in Ukraine.

Do you think that NATO has become more of a realist security agreement, created to defend the interests of its member states rather than ensuring mutual help?

Exactly. It is exemplified in what Trump said in Davos, 10 days ago, as he agrees to defend Greenland only if he owns it. By saying that he's completely undermined Article 5, as an attack on a member is an attack on all, regardless of ownership of the territory. Signs of erosion of NATO were already visible in the NATO summit in June in the Hague. While everyone seemed happy with the summit declaration, I think that people read it too hastily as it did not use the words *at all times* to Article 5, which were present in all the other NATO summit declarations, and is testimonial to the ironclad commitment to Article 5. Their absence undermines Article 5, adding a conditionality dimension to it: say Lithuania is attacked and you don't have the words *at all times*, Trump could say, well I don't think transatlantic security is at stake, let's give Lithuania away.

Another shocking element of the NATO summit declaration is, for the first time in NATO's existence, the lack of mention of Article 1, the words *international justice*, or *UN peace*. These words are important as they have this sort of moral meaning. The NATO we now have is the NATO of the law of the stronger. If you look at the American national security strategy, they have literally said that they are not so interested in a rules-based order. It is now a completely realist NATO, serving American interests and without a moral foundation. I don't think the Americans will ever exit NATO voluntarily because it's too useful of an instrument for them.

The dilemma faced by members in dealing with the whole Greenland case was that a fellow NATO member wanted Greenland. Had it been Putin, the reaction from NATO countries would have been much easier because Putin is the enemy. What can you do if your own ally wants to annex your own territory? How can you speak of an alliance in the proper sense of the word if one ally is threatening another? I think that NATO is becoming more and more a realist instrument serving American power and a paper tiger, deeply affecting its credibility in guaranteeing the security of its members.

People sometimes mention the security clause of the European Union as a viable alternative to that of NATO, notably due to its stronger wording [if a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States have an obligation to aid and assist it by all the means in their power,]. While the EU currently does not have a similar military force as the US, do you think that in the medium or longer term, this could be a viable alternative to a now perhaps truly defunct NATO?

I think that this EU clause is often underestimated. Although it's more forceful than the NATO clause on paper, it's less forceful in reality because the EU without the American military might is not half as powerful. However, I do think that it can provide a solution or at least the beginning of a solution in the future, especially if the EU continues joining forces with non-European members or non-Euro-transatlantic members like the UK, Canada, Norway, or Turkey. There are already talks now of having a sort of European Security Council which would be the EU, plus Canada, Norway, the UK, and Turkey. I think that the UK is absolutely essential in terms of security; if we lose the US we can't survive without the UK. If the EU reinvents itself and starts operating on that clause, while having a European Security Council, and drawing from the experience of the Coalition of the Willing, it could absolutely be a solution. It demands a complete paradigm shift on the way of conceiving your own security, your own military forces, because up until now we have assigned that to the Americans. I think

Greenland has confronted Europe finally, which is a positive side of the Greenland crisis, as we shouldn't make the Americans any longer responsible for our own security.

While we have seen reluctance in European countries to engage with greater European strategic autonomy, notably during the Biden presidency, do you think that there is enough support amongst European elites to reconceptualize security in such a fundamental way?

I think that two months ago I would have answered your question very differently. Recent research by the Netherlands Atlantic Association shows that more Dutch citizens find Trump to be a greater threat to our security than Putin. I would agree with them, not because Putin is a better man than Trump morally, as in sort of moral terms I would say that Trump and Putin are on a similar level, but because Trump has more military might. I think we're slowly beginning to realize that Trump is an authoritarian leader as the US has become as authoritarian in one year as Turkey, Hungary, and Russia did in about 10 years.

The Greenland crisis has really shown that, apart from what's happening with ICE and the shooting of innocent citizens, a lot of Europeans don't want to be associated with America anymore. You see that there are fewer tourists going to America and fewer students going to America. I think that everything that Trump does is so over the top, that there is finally a real realization, not only in the governments and in the capitals, but also among people, that we can't rely on the US anymore. This has been a big issue since the end of the Cold War: you had two camps, NATO versus the Warsaw Pact, and of course, you could rely on the US because the US wanted to win the Cold War: it needed a coherent NATO.

I'm currently working on archival research on the Dutch case and the NATO expansion in the 1990s. It is interesting to already see that in 1993 and 1994, the Dutch parliament proposed a European pillar in NATO, which is exactly what we can read in current government. After the Cold War, there was this huge concern not because there was a lunatic leading America, but

because NATO had lost its purpose after the Cold War and there was a huge concern that the Americans would withdraw or would lose interest in it. This sparked a lot of talk concerning strategic autonomy, by building a European pillar in NATO and spending more on defense. I am currently writing an article on the foreign and defense policy of the Schoof government, and some of the arguments are identical to those of the 1994-95 NATO expansion. It was fair, the Cold War was over so why were the Americans going to be interested in Europe. For the last 30 years, there's been a trend of Americans slowly withdrawing from NATO which has been completely accelerated by an authoritarian leader. NATO always prided itself on being an alliance of liberal democratic countries. And according to some international relations theories, liberal democratic countries can't go to war with each other. Yet, I think that the mere fact that Trump considered going to war over Greenland shows that America is not a liberal democratic country anymore. I think that the seeds of this crisis have been here since the end of the Cold War, but the real paradigm shift is America's transformation from a liberal democratic country into an authoritarian country.

In that way, we live in an era which is sort of the opposite of the end of the Cold War. Between the 9th of November, 1989, and the fall of the Berlin Wall to the 31st of October 1990 and the reunification of Germany we had the period often called the acceleration of history. So many things happened so quickly: countries in Eastern Central Europe were liberated, Communism fell in authoritarian regimes. As put by Fukuyama, it very much seemed like the end of history as we were all on one way to liberal democracy. What we now see is an acceleration of history in the exact opposite direction: the world order is collapsing, populism, right-wing nationalism, and authoritarianism are rising in Europe. Trump is a kind of caricature of that tendency. A recent article portrayed Trump as the anti-Gorbachev. The Warsaw Pact fell apart because these were all authoritarian leaders and suddenly the head of the alliance became almost a liberal democratic leader, precipitating the collapse of the whole of Eastern Europe.

The American president has always really been in charge of NATO: but now that president is actually saying goodbye to liberal democracy. We've had America that was a sort of like-minded country but it no longer is: NATO is suddenly headed by a country whose president has more in common with Putin than with the other NATO members. It's not a coincidence that the Russian government was very enthusiastic about the American national security strategy. This proves my point that we might find ourselves at the beginning of history, in that we'll witness major clashes again. The US current defense strategy is very explicitly saying goodbye to the rules-based order which calls for a completely different EU, one that works very closely with the UK and other strategic partners.

How do you think Europe should now change its approach to, for instance, a country like China? For a long time we have been relatively critical of China for its lack of democratic processes. We've also always had America as our big partner because there was this large liberal democratic camp that we had belonged to for decades. Do you think that Europe should now compromise its stance towards world democracy to favour business? Should it start balancing more realistically between different partners? And for instance engage more meaningfully with China?

I think it doesn't have a choice and you can already see states are doing it. Over the past couple of days, the UK has really tightened its relations with China, notably at the leadership level. And I think we should also do what Carney [*Canadian Prime Minister*] said in seeking other medium and regional powers to work with. I really hope that the American Treaty is coming into effect within the EU despite the legal issues. I think we should become more pragmatic and distinguish two things: the EU including the UK, should act as a moral actor by, for example, condemning the genocide in Gaza. And on the other hand, who we do business or deals with simply to survive. We can't survive anymore by having the moral high ground alone because now that the US doesn't have the moral high ground anymore, our moral high ground isn't high enough to survive. And of course the genocide in

Gaza has already exposed how much Europe deals with double standards. And I think it would become easier for Europe because then it could also loosen ties with Israel and the Netanyahu regime to, you know, deal with two levels. We've got a moral level and we have moral judgments at that level. But it doesn't mean that we only engage with the regimes that we morally agree with. Because basically there are too few regimes of those left, you know, because the US is collapsing and Israel isn't the moral regime.

Having this moral high ground only exposes the double standards because by dealing with Israel and dealing with Washington, we're already not dealing with regimes that we agree with in terms of human rights and international laws. So we might as well deal with China too, if you see what I mean. And then be honest about it. I think this is also what Carney said in not keeping appearances anymore. I think he said we should deal with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. It was a very nice sentence.

In this new world, what will be the most important regional powers? Who do we /Europe/ have to look out for?

I think what Trump is trying to do is to divide the world between Putin, Xi, and himself. There is this whole idea of influence spheres which can be seen with all the deals that have been made about Ukraine over the past year. None of them were deals in favor of Ukraine. They were all deals in favor of sort of a pragmatism saying, you know, let's give a little bit to Putin and I keep a little bit and we can all rule in our own influence spheres. So I think we do have to watch Russia, but I don't think Russia is strong enough. Although I fear Russia's strengths since Trump plays so much into the hands of Putin, you know, with the whole Greenland crisis. Putin just has to sit back and laugh and say things about international law occasionally because Trump is breaking it at least as much as Putin is.

I think what we do have to look out for is the Global South. I think we really have to start taking the Global South seriously and deal with those countries. I think that we have to deal with China and sort of step over our own shadow. I also think the BRICS is something we've very much underestimated. We also have to become

aware of things like that in the eyes of, say, the Global South: the war in Ukraine is a regional war, whereas the genocide in Gaza is a global crisis. Whereas I think from the European perspective we see it the other way around. We think that the war in Ukraine is the beginning of World War III and Gaza is a regional crisis.

Turkey, I think, is an interesting player that we have to watch out for, because it plays on different chessboards simultaneously. The BRICS countries, like I said, and a lot of other medium powers. I think we have to deal very seriously with the UK, because we can't survive without them. Canada, I think, is becoming a very interesting partner, you know, a transatlantic partner that we do share moral values with. So I think we completely have to start conceptualizing how we view international relations. I was worried about the objections and the legal procedures against Mercosur, because I think what we have to become aware of now is, you know, we've lost the moral high ground already. And we now have to be aware that we don't, as with the moral high ground, lose our independence altogether as well. And we have to start dealing with other countries, regardless of how they treat homosexuals or whatever. I mean, that sounds awful, but that is how the world is. We have to face the facts, I think.

So Europe should essentially start acting more like a geopolitical hard power?

Yes. In 2021, the Global Gateway Initiative was launched as a European alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative. Although Europe is now in fact investing strategically in infrastructure in the Global South, which before this wasn't done, one of the main things that it is often criticized for, is that we are still tying it to European norms and reforms, a very slow and bureaucratic process.

Do you think that Europe should still be focused on exporting its own norms and attempting to impose its own model on other countries? Or is this something that may come back to bite us?

Yes, I think it already is. With the rise of populism and far-right nationalism, I think there's not that much left that we can export anymore, to

be frank. And like I said, with our own former allies like Israel, you know, turning into a genocidal regime, and Trump turning into an authoritarian regime with ICE as this kind of fascist bully. I think we have to separate the whole idea of exporting norms from how we geopolitically deal with other countries. It doesn't mean that we have to let go of those norms, but I actually think in order to at least safeguard those norms in Europe, we have to be less obsessed with imposing them on other countries.

It's one of the problems with the Mercosur Treaty, a treaty with countries which have different norms than ours. But if the alternative is a complete dependence on America, where people are either Trumpian or are already fleeing from America, I think we have to face the fact and say there's a kind of moral bankruptcy that's irreversible. If we want to survive and at least maintain the norms in Europe, we have to be more pragmatic in what we do outside Europe.

Assuming that the US stays a functioning democracy, with Trump accepting to leave office, do you think that a democratic president in the US would be able to even slightly still salvage the situation? Because that is, of course, what people thought Biden would do, and it turned out to not really happen.

I think it's irreversible. So I think what Trump has done, and it's, of course, a longer process, but he's been the biggest protagonist in this process, is a kind of demolition that's irreversible. So it's not just saying, I don't care about the UN or doing your own thing, but it's saying out loud in an interview with the New York Times, you know, I don't believe in international law, I steer on my own moral compass. Or that the National Security asserts that rules-based order is over. And these things aren't mere rhetoric, because if an American president says that, and while judges from the ICC don't receive their salaries anymore, not because America is a partner of the International Criminal Court, but because they belong to the Swift system.

I think there's a kind of power politics at play that will grant a big role for tech, and will survive without Trump. I don't think the damage that has

been done in international institutions, as well as national institutions in the US, which have been eroded from within, I don't think that's a reversible process. You see it with the war in Iraq: there was America, supported by European countries, intervening in other countries for reasons that actually weren't morally justified or in line with international law. Until recently, before Trump too, there was also always the pretext that it was to fight terrorists or export democracy or, to get rid of non-existing weapons of mass destruction. And that pretext mattered. Because of that pretext, all these acts were taking place within the system of international law. The fact that Trump sort of practices what he preaches in a very ironic and paradoxical way, I think that's the sort of final blow to a pattern that we've seen going on for longer.

I think that if a democratic president were to come to power, there could be a small sense of damage control. But the world, as we've known it since, you know, the end of World War II and the way we're celebrating 80 years of peace and all those liberal institutions being built up, I don't think that is something that you can reverse easily. And I think there are too many factors at play, not just Trump, but also populism, anti-globalism, far-right nationalism. Look at the government we've had until recently now, actually until the next three weeks probably. Look at the fact that Reform UK now looks to become the biggest party in the UK, Le Pen in France, Alice Weidel *[Germany]* gaining traction. And I think, previous American presidents have ignored international law or they've sort of cast it aside, where Trump has really demolished it. So I don't think that can be undone.

About the elections, I don't think we can call America a liberal democratic country anymore. I've got colleagues in the US who don't dare to google certain words because of their own security. There were five American senators or congressmen, I forgot, in favor of curbing Trump's military power after the Venezuela intervention and they were pressured so much that I think three of them changed course again. You know, I wonder if there are going to be democratic elections. And the other thing is, if we get someone like Vance who's more ideologically *still* than Trump, it could be worse.

Take something like climate change, which, in order to curb it, needs extremely fast overarching and aggressive action from all involved states, something that should be done through an international law contract. You need a great amount of treaties to build on the Paris Agreement and hold countries accountable. Do you think that, in this context, it is still possible for these different powers to tackle these issues together, through strong global governance?

I think at best we've got a setback of several decades. And of course with the environment that's almost lethal because you can't undo what you're doing now. If you look at what's happened to the Paris Agreement, to the United Nations, to the World Health Fund and so on, we've backtracked a lot on what we've done. So there might be a backlash in a positive sense, but that will take time and we can't help make up for the lost time. I think we were already almost too late.

I think what we really see is the end of the rules-based order with Trump playing an altogether

different game, and a game that Putin understands better than that a lot of European leaders understand. And I think the only positive thing that happened over Greenland was that Europe started talking the language of strengths with the idea of trade and Bazooka [*officially: EU Anti-Coercion Instrument*]. I'm afraid that speaking the language of strengths, which is the language that Trump but also Xi, and people in BRICS countries and so on, understand. That's the language we need to speak, you know, the power of strength. And that we can combine our own morals and norms, with being realistic on how much we can impose them on others. I think that's the best-case scenario for now.

It is modesty combined with being very assertive. Can you still have norms as long as you also have a Bazooka to enforce those norms, essentially, the same way that the US used to do?

Yes, and also you can have those norms yourself, but you can't perhaps expect to be able to export those norms everywhere else when you have to fight for your own survival.



MIDAS VAN DE WEETERING -
Publication Director,
Geschiedenis Actueel
Think-Tank

NUCLEAR SHARING AND NON-PROLIFERATION: CONDITIONAL EFFECTIVENESS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD



Introduction

The second presidency of Trump has brought considerable instability to the long-standing alliances of the United States (US). Adopting a transactional approach on the world stage, Trump stated, “If they [NATO allies] don't pay, I'm not going to defend them.”¹ Such statements have generated uncertainty in Europe about whether the US would truly come to their aid in a large-scale conflict. Particularly alarming were the US president's recent threats toward Denmark over Greenland. Demanding territory from a European treaty ally.²

Although NATO's 5% spending agreement may have alleviated some concerns, and the threat regarding Greenland appears to be overstated, significant questions about US commitments persist.³ Europe must now confront the reality that the traditional US-led unipolar order, which it had long enjoyed, has come to an end. European

leaders such as Merz and Macron have openly called for greater European autonomy.⁴ While European states may be able to rearm their conventional forces, the issue of nuclear deterrence remains a thorny challenge.⁵

Recent discourse on nuclear weapons has been dominated by developments in the Russo-Ukrainian War. Throughout the conflict, Russia has repeatedly threatened to use its nuclear arsenal in an attempt to delay Western aid to Ukraine.⁶ Although the Kremlin's nuclear threats have had little impact on the war, they nonetheless represent a troubling normalisation of nuclear weapons as a tool of coercion in international politics.

At the same time, China has accelerated the modernisation and expansion of its nuclear arsenal, adding approximately 100 new warheads in 2024–2025.⁷ In response, Japan has begun constructing new nuclear shelters and strengthening protection against electromagnetic pulse (EMP) attacks.⁸ India

is developing new nuclear weapon delivery systems, and the North Korean arsenal continues to grow.⁹ Taken together, these developments suggest an emerging global trend toward a renewed nuclear arms race.

While various states expand their nuclear weapons capabilities, the non-proliferation regime is under strain following the failure of the 2022 conference to adopt the five-year review of the treaty.¹⁰ The US–Russia nuclear arms treaty has also expired, and several states have signalled their willingness to develop independent nuclear weapons programs.¹¹ Even a small number of states moving in this direction could lower the political barriers for others to follow. The emergence of new nuclear-armed states would heighten insecurity among neighbouring countries, potentially prompting reciprocal proliferation in a chain reaction. This could result in a world characterized by a complex and volatile deterrence landscape, increasing the risks of miscalculation, arms races, and nuclear crises across multiple regions simultaneously.

This strategic environment has placed the Europeans in a tenuous position. Without the US nuclear umbrella, only two comparatively limited nuclear arsenals remain: those of the United Kingdom (UK) and France.¹² These could serve as a European nuclear deterrent, something German Chancellor Friedrich Merz recently mentioned at the Munich Security Conference last February, stating that he “spoke with [French President] Emmanuel Macron about a European nuclear deterrence.”¹³ At the moment, however, there are no nuclear-sharing arrangements among European countries. Because of this security environment, several European states have signaled that they may reconsider their non-nuclear status.¹⁴

This would not be the first time the international system has faced such pressures. After the end of the Second World War, the emergence of bipolar rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union triggered the first wave of nuclear proliferation. The Soviet Union tested its first atomic device in 1949, followed by the United Kingdom, France, and China in subsequent

decades.¹⁵ Yet, despite the immense power of the nuclear weapon, proliferation remained limited. Within the Western context, a decisive factor was nuclear sharing. The US stationed nuclear weapons in Europe for use by Europeans in case of war, reducing the incentives for European states to pursue independent nuclear capabilities.

Most of the academic literature emphasizes the successes of US nuclear sharing or states, demonstrating that nuclear sharing was more than merely deterrence.¹⁶ Authors such as Stéfanie von Hlatky and Émile Lambert-Deslandes convincingly argue that the nuclear sharing system played a role in reducing the incentives for proliferation in Europe while keeping the US engaged on the continent.¹⁷ Recent coverage has also emphasized the deterioration of the nuclear sharing system in the West, its consequences, and potential alternatives.¹⁸ Emphasizing the risk of security instability in Europe and even raising the possibility of countries developing their own nuclear weapons.¹⁹ To further analyze specific cases of nuclear sharing, this paper draws on a variety of sources, including the work of Italian nuclear weapons expert Leopoldo Nuti.²⁰ The main contribution of this study to the historiography is to sharpen our understanding of the limits of nuclear sharing as a policy tool for preventing nuclear proliferation.

The main question this paper seeks to answer is why nuclear sharing prevented proliferation in some Cold War cases but failed in others, and what this reveals about the applicability of this policy in the contemporary multipolar order. To address this question, the paper is divided into three parts. The first section explores the history of nuclear sharing, with particular emphasis on the geopolitical and military pressures that shaped its development. The second section analyzes whether US nuclear sharing actually prevented nuclear proliferation, using the examples of Italy and France. The insights gained are then applied in the third section, which examines where nuclear sharing might succeed or fail in preventing proliferation in contemporary cases.

Nuclear sharing during the Cold War

Nuclear cooperation among Atlantic allies began in the early Cold War. After the Second World War, the US was the only nuclear-armed state but considered itself militarily outmatched by the Soviet Army in Europe. The use of nuclear weapons became central to NATO doctrine as a means of compensating for this disparity.²¹ To implement this strategy effectively, the US sought to store its nuclear weapons in Europe, enabling a rapid response if the Western Bloc came under attack from the Soviets. The US also offered its European allies the ability to use its nuclear arsenal in the event of a nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union.²²

The response of the Europeans was varied. Norway, Denmark, and Iceland rejected any involvement in nuclear warfare and prohibited the storage of nuclear weapons on their territories.²³ Despite their wishes, the US was never shy about storing nuclear weapons on both Greenland and Iceland without informing the Danish and Icelandic governments.²⁴ States situated more directly in the potential path of Soviet attack, including the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany, adopted a markedly more receptive stance. Following negotiations, these countries ended up hosting American nuclear weapons, some of which were intended for use by the host countries' militaries. Even the United Kingdom, despite developing its own nuclear weapons program, stored the most American nuclear weapons outside of the US.²⁵

This situation quickly raised questions for both the US and European countries regarding the authority and control over these weapons.²⁶ The US sought to maintain as much oversight as possible over its nuclear arsenal stationed in Europe. Although the US president retained a formal veto over the use of nuclear weapons in European territories, there was little Washington could do if this veto were disregarded.²⁷ US policymakers feared that, during an international crisis between NATO and the Soviet Union, host countries might seize nuclear storage sites and employ the weapons without US authorization.²⁸ Particularly in the territories of less politically stable states such as

Turkey and West Germany.²⁹

To address these concerns, the Kennedy administration approved the addition of Permissive Action Links (PALs) to nuclear weapons in 1962.³⁰ These electromechanical devices were designed to prevent the weapons from being armed or detonated without explicit authorization from the US president.³¹ Additional safety systems were eventually implemented, some of which would disable or destroy the weapon if it was tampered with.³² Collectively, these measures provided Washington with a significantly enhanced sense of control and security over its deployed nuclear arsenal.

For the Europeans, the main problem was the lack of authority and oversight over the weapons stationed on their territory. In the early Cold War, the primary fear was that a trigger-happy US might initiate a nuclear war using its arsenal in Europe without consulting the host countries, effectively dragging the Europeans into a nuclear conflict against their consent. A few years later, following the introduction of the Flexible Response doctrine in 1967, European states became concerned that the US might not use its nuclear arsenal to defend Europe at all.³³ The Europeans were concerned that the US would refuse to sacrifice its own cities and population in a nuclear war solely to defend Europe. Equally concerning was the limited information Washington shared regarding the operations and status of the nuclear storage sites.³⁴

Although the Europeans had limited leverage, the US was nevertheless compelled to take their concerns. The primary concern was that some European states might follow the Scandinavian example and request the removal of US nuclear stockpiles from their territories, or, more alarmingly, pursue independent nuclear weapons programs. This concern was particularly acute after France successfully tested its first nuclear weapon in 1960, raising fears that other countries might emulate the French example.³⁵

Within the Western alliance, several attempts were made to address these concerns. The first occurred during a meeting in Athens in 1960,

where NATO allies agreed on the “Athens Guidelines,” which outlined the rules for nuclear engagement. The memorandum documenting the discussions explicitly stated the “dual purpose” of addressing both the fear of “unwarranted delay in the use” of nuclear weapons by the US and European concerns that they would not be consulted.³⁶ However, these meetings did little to alleviate European anxieties, as they stipulated that consultation was “desirable” but not mandatory.³⁷

Shortly thereafter, the US proposed the Multilateral Force (MLF), an ambitious plan to establish a fleet of ships and submarines equipped with Polaris ballistic missiles armed with nuclear warheads. This fleet would be crewed by NATO members other than the US. The initiative aimed to provide Europeans with a more active role in the nuclear defense of Western Europe, thereby strengthening NATO unity.³⁸ While many European countries supported the proposal, significant disagreements arose between the British, while the Americans themselves were divided over the proposal.³⁹ Ultimately, the US lost interest in the MLF and abandoned the project around 1965.⁴⁰ A year later, the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) was introduced as a forum within NATO to discuss nuclear doctrine.⁴¹ Once again, the US sought to prevent nuclear proliferation among its allies.⁴² The NPG facilitated improved communication among NATO members and allowed the US to consult with its European allies regarding the nuclear weapons stationed on their territories. Beyond the limited scope of the NPG, most negotiations concerning nuclear weapons were conducted on a bilateral basis.⁴³

Despite the challenges faced by formal multilateral cooperation, nuclear sharing as a whole can be considered a success. US nuclear sharing was not merely aimed at deterring adversaries; it aligned the interests of the US with those of its European allies. This extended beyond simply stationing nuclear weapons in Europe; it also involved allies in collective deterrence, thereby reducing the incentives for independent nuclear programs by embedding deterrence within a collective alliance framework. Additionally, it played a key role in maintaining alliance cohesion

and ensuring burden-sharing. For the US, nuclear sharing helped prevent nuclear proliferation while retaining control over its nuclear arsenal. For European states, it ensured continued US engagement and alignment with their security interests.⁴⁴

The Exception and the Almost Exception

One significant exception challenges the general effectiveness of nuclear sharing as a tool of non-proliferation. When the US first approached Europe to negotiate deals over nuclear sharing, the French were approached as well. The French, however, ignored the US overtures and started to develop their own nuclear arsenal. In 1959, France refused to station nuclear weapons on its soil unless they were directly under French control, even forcing the removal of 200 fighter bombers that could carry US nuclear weapons that same year.⁴⁵ Not long after, De Gaulle’s France left the NATO command structure altogether in 1966, only returning in 2009.⁴⁶ The French wanted to regain their national sovereignty and preserve their status as a great power. The development of nuclear weapons must be understood as part of a larger French push to preserve autonomy from the US.⁴⁷ It is therefore not difficult to conclude that, even under very generous terms, nuclear sharing would not have been likely to dissuade the French from continuing their pursuit of nuclear weapon capabilities.⁴⁸

Italy presents a more ambiguous case, characterized by a strategy centered on international cooperation.⁴⁹ The Italians aimed to become a nuclear power without directly owning the nuclear weapons themselves. This approach was abandoned after the MLF failed and negotiations for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) began in 1968. After this, the Italians feared being relegated to a second-rate, permanently non-nuclear state within NATO if they did not develop their own nuclear weapon.⁵⁰

In response to the NPT negotiations, Rome initiated a process of “nuclear hedging,” meaning the Italians would not directly build a bomb, but would develop and maintain capabilities that could

enable them to create one on short notice. New weapons delivery systems were developed, such as the Alfa, which could potentially use nuclear warheads.⁵¹ In this way, the Italians maintained some strategic autonomy while remaining compliant with the NPT. While doing so, Rome also attempted to delay the NPT negotiations.⁵²

This process came under tremendous pressure from the Italian public, scientists, and even high-level ministers within parliament.⁵³ The delayed ratification of the NPT became a public controversy. Allies were also unhappy with nuclear hedging. The NPT regime is still fragile, especially after India defied it in 1974 with its own nuclear test.⁵⁴ The US and other Western allies feared that the Italians would weaken the NPT regime even further with their nuclear hedging.⁵⁵ Eventually, with mounting pressure both internal and external, Rome abandoned its nuclear hedging approach.⁵⁶

These cases demonstrate both the effectiveness and the limitations of nuclear sharing. US nuclear sharing altered the underlying motivations driving states' desire for nuclear weapons. For both Paris and Rome, however, the pursuit of an independent nuclear capability was seen as a means to enhance autonomy and assert status within the Western alliance. In this context, nuclear sharing proved insufficient to deter such ambitions. Furthermore, the Italian case underscores that nuclear sharing was far from the only factor influencing the decision to forgo nuclear weapons. For Rome, it was the costs, internal opposition, and international pressure that ultimately led it to abandon its nuclear hedging strategy.

Nuclear sharing in the modern multipolar world

The preceding analysis has focused primarily on historical cases from the Cold War. However, its broader relevance lies in the lessons these findings offer for today's increasingly multipolar world. These insights will now be applied to contemporary cases to assess where the approach might be effective in preventing nuclear proliferation and where it is likely to fall short.

The first case is Turkey, a state that has shown worrying signs that it is preparing to establish a nuclear program.⁵⁷ The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) has come under fire from Turkey's foreign minister.⁵⁸ President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has stated that it is unfair that Turkey does not have nuclear weapons, saying, "Some countries have missiles with nuclear warheads, not one or two. But (they tell us) we can't have them. This, I cannot accept."⁵⁹ Developing nuclear weapons also enjoys majority support within Turkey.⁶⁰

It is unclear how a nuclear weapon would improve their security situation. The Turkish conventional military is strong, outmatching all of its neighbors.⁶¹ Especially now that it is likely that Turkey will enter the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, a military alliance often nicknamed the "Muslim NATO."⁶² As a result, Turkey would benefit from the protection of both the US and the emerging Pakistani nuclear umbrella.⁶³

It is evident that Turkey's potential pursuit of a nuclear program is not driven by its security environment, but rather by a desire to obtain strategic autonomy from NATO and gain the status of a regional power.⁶⁴ Similar to the French case during the Cold War, the provision of nuclear sharing is unlikely to deter Turkey from pursuing its own nuclear weapons program. However, this does not imply that Turkey faces an immediate risk of developing a nuclear weapon. Similar to the Italian case during the Cold War, Turkey may determine that the costs associated with pursuing an independent nuclear weapons program are simply high. Consequently, international pressure and sanctions may represent more effective instruments for influencing Ankara's nuclear decision-making. This is in stark contrast to Poland. After the 2022 Russian invasion of neighboring Ukraine, the nation has been preparing for war.⁶⁵ The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs stated, "We're facing an existential threat from the Russian Federation."⁶⁶ Being reliant on the US for its security, Poland now finds itself exposed during the second Trump term.⁶⁷ This became evident when Russian drones violated Poland's airspace, an incident that was

shrugged off by Trump as nothing more than a small mistake.⁶⁸

Because of this, Polish politicians have openly stated their need for a nuclear deterrent against the Russians. Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk stated that “Poland must look at acquiring nuclear weapons,” going on to state his nation would be safer if it had a nuclear deterrent.⁶⁹ Polish President Karol Nawrocki stated he was “a great supporter of Poland joining the nuclear project.”⁷⁰ Some Polish policymakers have even proposed nuclear sharing themselves.⁷¹ Former President Andrzej Duda asked Washington to station nuclear weapons in Poland.⁷² Tusk mentioned similar ideas about the extension of the French nuclear umbrella.⁷³

It is possible that Poland is not genuinely considering the development of an independent nuclear weapons program. The threat of proliferation is likely being utilized as a bargaining tool to secure nuclear sharing agreements. Nevertheless, Warsaw’s signaling warrants serious consideration. Poland has already shown a willingness to abandon international norms by formally withdrawing from the Ottawa Convention on Landmines this year. Poland’s Deputy Defense Minister Pawel Zalewski explained that, “We are not an aggressive country, but we have to use all means to deter Russia.”⁷⁴

Poland is not the only state that has threatened nuclear proliferation. Former South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol said that “The Republic of Korea could deploy tactical nuclear weapons or possess its own nukes.”⁷⁵ Similar to Poland, South Korea explicitly asserts that it must either obtain nuclear weapons from the US or pursue the development of its own.⁷⁶ Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has stated his nation’s intent to create a nuclear weapons program if the West refuses to give it proper security guarantees. Although he later walked back his statement, saying “We don’t do...nuclear weapons.”⁷⁷

The nuclear sharing approach might also work in authoritarian states that seek regime

security. Although interesting, it is likely to remain hypothetical, since it is extremely unlikely that anyone would consider nuclear sharing with an unstable and isolated state such as Iran.⁷⁸ Nuclear sharing requires power sharing within an alliance, which necessitates trust. Russia has recently approached Belarus to station nuclear weapons there. These nuclear weapons will remain under complete Russian control. In many ways, Belarus is not a nuclear partner but rather a nuclear hostage.⁷⁹ This type of nuclear “sharing” is not based on trust but rather on dominance, as it is difficult to imagine that the diplomatically isolated and small Belarus could defy Moscow when the deal was made.⁸⁰

There is already a case in which a nuclear umbrella has been extended to another state. The Saudis have also threatened to create nuclear weapons, mainly to counter the Iranian threat. Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Salman stated, “We’ll enter the nuclear arms race if Iran does.”⁸¹ Once again, it is clear these threats are made because of an external threat. This is likely one of the reasons the Saudis entered an alliance with the Pakistanis. With Pakistan’s nuclear capabilities now extended to its new ally, Riyadh is not obliged to pursue an independent nuclear weapons program.⁸² Although this is not a case of nuclear sharing, as long as the Saudis are safe under the Pakistani nuclear umbrella, it is extremely unlikely they will develop their own nuclear weapons program, even if Iran does so successfully.

Conclusion

During the Cold War, US nuclear sharing proved effective in reducing the need for nuclear proliferation. By stationing nuclear weapons in Europe and involving its allies, the US reduced incentives for independent nuclear programs. Although formal multilateral initiatives faced challenges, nuclear sharing tied US and European security interests together. Thereby strengthening collective deterrence and helping prevent proliferation among its allies. However, this approach has limits. As seen in the French case, their leaders sought to preserve national autonomy and assert great-power status, so they pursued an independent nuclear arsenal despite US offers. In

Italy, the decision to abandon nuclear hedging was influenced not only by sharing arrangements but also by internal opposition, costs, and international pressure, showing that nuclear sharing alone was not always decisive.

Applied to our current multipolar world, these historical cases suggest that nuclear sharing may work when states' primary concern is security and alliance protection. It is unlikely to deter states whose motivations are strategic autonomy, status, or regional influence. For instance, in the Turkish case, interest in nuclear weapons appears to be driven more by a desire for regional influence than by actual security needs; therefore, sharing alone is

unlikely to work.

In the case of states such as Poland, Ukraine, or South Korea, nuclear sharing might work. In fact, it is likely that these states are trying to leverage the potential for nuclear acquisition to secure extended guarantees under the US, British, or French nuclear umbrella. The French and British could station some of their nuclear arsenal in Poland, bringing the European alliance closer together while preventing nuclear proliferation. In a case such as Turkey, international pressure and sanctions might be a wiser option.



DIRK VOCKING

FROM HEGEMONY TO SPHERES OF INFLUENCE: THE RETURN OF REGIONALISM IN A FRAGMENTING GLOBAL ORDER

It begins not with a summit, a treaty, or a grand speech, but with a feeling. A sense that something in the global fabric has shifted. Not overnight, not all at once, but steadily, like the slow receding of a tide. The old maps of power, once so sharply drawn, have begun to blur at the edges.

One can hear it in the way diplomats speak, now more cautious about invoking the international community. It can be seen in supply chains that bend toward regional hubs, in military alliances whose meanings grow more local than global, and in capitals from Brasília to Jakarta where policymakers talk less about global leadership and more about regional resilience. Something is giving way, and something else is forming in its place. Some call this new shape *multipolar*. Others describe it as *nonpolar*, or simply unpredictable.

But perhaps the most telling development is not what global power is becoming, but where it is going.⁸³ The answer, increasingly, is this: back to the region. This is not the first time in history it has curled in this direction. In the late 1930s, as global cooperation frayed and old empires clashed with new ideologies, a British scholar named Edward Hallett Carr issued a sharp warning. He believed that the idea of a universal, peaceful order, then imagined by the League of Nations, was dangerously detached from reality.⁸⁴ What mattered most, Carr argued, was the actual *distribution of power*; and the often regional structures through which that power could be made stable again.⁸⁵ The world he lived in was on the brink of catastrophe. Ours may not be there yet, but we, too, are watching the long-standing pillars of global coordination weaken. Institutions built in the hopeful aftermath of World War II, like the United Nations, the

Bretton Woods system, and even NATO, now seem stretched thin between their founding ideals

and present-day frictions. The crises we face, climate, pandemics, food security, migration, cyber conflict, cross borders, but defy global responses. Coordination is elusive. Trust even more so. And yet, the vacuum is not total.

In this space between *no longer* and *not yet*, something familiar is stirring. Regional powers are stepping forward, not just as participants but as architects of new political realities. From the African Union's (AU) diplomatic missions in Sudan, to the growing gravitational pull of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to the reassertion of influence by middle powers like Türkiye, Brazil and India, the world is no longer shaped by a single pole, if it ever truly was.⁸⁶ It is being reassembled into spheres, like the Indo-Pacific, the EU's strategic neighbourhood, or the Gulf region, each developing its own political rhythm.

This process is often described in technocratic terms: "regionalization", "minilateralism", "decoupling".⁸⁷ But beneath the jargon lies a deeper shift, one that is as much about identity, history, and sovereignty as it is about strategy. In an era where universal norms struggle to find or are losing traction, regional systems might be able to offer bounded legitimacy. Rules that feel closer to home. Governance that does not aspire to be global, but rather *good enough* for those within its orbit.

It is tempting to see this as fragmentation, a turn inward, and there is truth in that. As Charles Kupchan wrote over a decade ago, we are entering

a “post-hegemonic world” where no single actor or ideology holds sway.⁸⁸ Richard Haass went further, describing our time as an “age of nonpolarity,” where power is scattered like confetti rather than concentrated in a few hands.⁸⁹ However, this might be only half of the picture.

The other half is about pattern, about how, in the absence of global consensus, new orders form around regional cores. The German foreign policy community has begun describing these patterns as *Krisenlandschaften*, landscapes of overlapping crises where local and regional solutions must pick up the slack.⁹⁰ In this framing, regionalism is not just an emergency response but a survival strategy.

This has been observed before. In trade, when global WTO negotiations faltered, regional agreements stepped in.⁹¹ In security, when the UN system stalled, coalitions of regional actors brokered ceasefires and peacekeeping missions.⁹² Even in values and norms, regional bodies have become testing grounds for pluralism, places where democracy, sovereignty, and non-alignment intersect in ways that no longer fit into previous binaries.

So, what does it mean to live in a world not ruled from the centre, but shaped from the edges? This article argues that the defining feature of today’s international order is not just a shift in power, but a reorganization into regional constellations that reflect diverse historical experiences, political imperatives, and normative frameworks. It asks: what are the causes and effects of this apparent transformation, and what does it reveal about the future of global order?

To answer this, the article proceeds in three steps. It first traces how regionalism has historically shaped global governance, not as an aberration but as a recurring mode of order-making. It then outlines the structural logics currently driving the resurgence of regional approaches from geopolitical shifts to normative disillusionment with universalism. Finally, it surveys how different regions today embody this return to the regional, not through a single model but through diverse, sometimes contradictory expressions.

The aim is not to predict a post-global future, but to understand how regionalism in its many forms is remaking the architecture of international cooperation. Whether this shift offers greater stability or simply recasts fragmentation in a new language remains an open question.

A Historical Echo: When Regionalism Rose Before

History does not repeat itself, but it often clears its throat.

When today’s policymakers describe a return to regional influence, they are not uncovering something new, rather they rediscover something familiar. Regionalism has long been a fallback in times of global uncertainty, a way of anchoring order when the broader world feels unmoored. To understand its reemergence now, one must look at the moments when it previously stepped forward, not in triumph, but out of necessity.

In 1939, as the pillars of liberal internationalism crumbled under the weight of economic collapse and rising nationalism, Carr diagnosed what he saw as a dangerous delusion: the belief that universal rules alone could sustain peace.⁹³ In his *Twenty Years’ Crisis*, he argued that without alignment between power and principle, the world would fracture into self-interested blocs and that regional arrangements might be the only realistic form of stability in such a world.⁹⁴ Carr’s realism was controversial then. It increasingly sounds prophetic now.

Fast forward to the Cold War, where regionalism took on another role as the subsidiary architecture to global governance. In practice, much of the world’s security was not managed through the United Nations, but through regional security complexes: NATO in the West, the Warsaw Pact in the East, ASEAN and the Gulf Cooperation Council in the Middle East.⁹⁵ As Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver later argued, these were not just side-effects of bipolarity, they were structures of their own, shaped by geography, history, and local threat perceptions.⁹⁶

During the Cold War, regions mattered because great powers needed them. After it, regions mattered because global institutions faltered. The collapse of the Soviet Union did not lead to the global liberal order triumphantly expanding into every corner of the earth. Instead, it left power vacuums. The universal norms of liberal governance struggled to root in the Balkans, West Africa and Central Asia.⁹⁷ Regional organizations, imperfect as they were, became first responders. The Economic Community of West African states (ECOWAS) intervened in Liberia and Sierra Leone.⁹⁸ ASEAN began a slow journey from economic community to political voice. The AU evolved from the shell of the Organization of African Unity into a more structured, security-conscious body.⁹⁹

As Heribert Dieter observed in the early 2000s, this shift was not limited to security. The failure of WTO's Doha Round and the growing paralysis of global trade negotiations signalled a broader retreat from multilateralism.¹⁰⁰ Regional economic blocs such as NAFTA, MERCOSUR, the EU's expansion and ASEAN+ frameworks began to take centre stage, not as stepping stones to global agreements, but as workarounds for their absence.¹⁰¹

But the most foundational rethinking came from outside the security and trade silos, from scholars who argued that the very role of the state was changing. They described how the late 20th century saw a "retreat of the state," where power seeped away from central governments and into the hands of markets, transnational corporations and regional constellations. In a world where globalization diluted the reach of any one authority, regional governance became a way of regaining control even if only partially.¹⁰²

This historical shift was not always coherent. Some regions institutionalized rapidly; others remained patchworks.¹⁰³ Some deepened their integration while others collapsed under conflicting interests.¹⁰⁴ But one pattern held: when global governance systems wavered, regions filled the vacuum.

Legal frameworks even anticipated this. Article 52 of the United Nations Charter explicitly allows for the role of regional arrangements in dealing with peace and security, provided they report to the Security Council.¹⁰⁵ In theory, these mechanisms were meant to support global governance. In practice, they often replaced it when the UN could not act either due to political deadlock or lack of reach.

Writing in 2014, Zaki Laïdi warned that multipolarity, far from being a more democratic alternative to hegemony, might undermine the very multilateral order that held postwar peace together. "In a post-hegemonic world," Laïdi argued, "norms are not universalized; they are regionalized".¹⁰⁶ That is not necessarily a tragedy, but it is not neutral either. When universal norms lose traction, the world does not become fairer. It becomes patchier. The irony is sharp: for all the talk of globalization, the late 20th and early 21st centuries have repeatedly shown that regions are where the real action is, not because they are more efficient but because they are more plausible. When trust breaks down, scale contracts. And regional systems, for all their limits, offer a scale people can believe in.

Yet this historical echo brings with it a warning. Regionalism has never been a perfect substitute for global coordination. It has papered over rifts, excluded outsiders, and, at times, deepened global divides. The Concert of Europe for example, a 19th-century "regional" solution among empires, was stable only because it was exclusionary.¹⁰⁷ The Cold War's spheres of influence may have offered balance, but they came at immense cost to sovereignty and autonomy in the peripheries.¹⁰⁸

So when speaking of today's return to regionalism, one should do so with clear eyes and deep memory. This is not just a new trend; it is a resurfacing tide. One that has always risen when the global centre weakens. One that offers promise, provided its past is not overlooked.

Worlds Apart: Regionalism as Practice and Possibility

If one were to travel the world not by flight path but by political fault lines, a peculiar pattern would emerge. In Southeast Asia, summits unfold under orchid-strewn ceilings with handshakes that speak louder than treaties. In Africa, armies mobilize under multilateral banners but falter without boots or budget. In Latin America, presidents hail new unions over old wine while borders remain as impermeable as ever. And in Central Asia and the Middle East, the very idea of *region* carries the weight of empire, religion, and rivalry.

The global order is not reorganizing into a tidy patchwork of mini-hegemons or neat concentric spheres. Rather, it is regionalizing, unevenly, improvisationally, and sometimes contradictorily. The following section sketches selected regional developments, not as case studies in the formal sense, but as vignettes that illustrate the many shapes and struggles of regionalism. Some are explored in greater depth than others with each serving a distinct function in understanding the global turn toward regional orders.

ASEAN has long puzzled analysts. It is at once modest in capability and grand in symbolism. Founded in 1967 amid Cold War tremors, it presented itself as a forum for dialogue rather than an alliance of enforcement.¹⁰⁹ Over time, it has become an exemplar of what Amitav Acharya calls a “security community”, not in the Western sense of military integration, but in the sense of mutual restraint, shared norms, and identity-building beyond formal structures.¹¹⁰

Critics often deride this as toothless regionalism. Yet ASEAN's quiet success lies in its ability to reduce intra-regional conflict and create a framework where non-intervention coexists with cooperation.¹¹¹ While it has struggled to address transnational threats like Myanmar's internal crisis or Chinese maritime assertiveness, its very survival and expansion from five to ten members testify to its diplomatic resilience.¹¹²

The ASEAN model illuminates a broader trend: in many parts of the world, regionalism is less about power projection and more about coexistence under constraint. In regions marked by diversity and trauma, formality may alienate more than it binds.

In Africa, regionalism has unfolded under both postcolonial imperatives and pressing security demands. The AU, born in 2002 out of the ashes of the Organization of African Unity, sought to create a continental governance structure that was both principled and capable of intervention. Among its flagship initiatives is the African Standby Force (ASF), designed to rapidly deploy troops in response to crises. Yet, as Jakkie Cilliers documents, the ASF has been hampered by logistical fragmentation, financial dependency, and diverging political will.¹¹³

Nonetheless, regional integration in Africa, especially through Regional Economic Communities (RECs) like ECOWAS or the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has taken on a growing political role.¹¹⁴ ECOWAS interventions in Mali and The Gambia, for instance, suggest that African regionalism is not merely decorative. It is a site of contestation and experimentation where sovereignty meets solidarity and regionalism becomes a vehicle for post-Westphalian innovation.¹¹⁵ Still, the AU remains caught between rhetorical ambition and operational inertia. It dreams in the language of unity, with continental parliaments, pan-African institutions, but acts in the grammar of fragmentation with overlapping regional bodies and contested mandates.

In Latin America, regionalism has always danced with ideology. The 1990s witnessed the rise of economic blocs like MERCOSUR, modelled in part after the EU and propelled by hopes of export-led integration.¹¹⁶ But by the early 2000s, a new wave emerged, more political, less neoliberal, and explicitly post-hegemonic.¹¹⁷

According to Pia Riggirozzi, organizations like UNASUR, ALBA, and CELAC represent a shift toward “people-centered regionalism”, often

critical of US influence and market orthodoxy.¹¹⁸ This was not just a change in institutions but in narrative: a regionalism based on social cohesion, autonomy, and alternative diplomacy.¹¹⁹

Yet this flowering proved fragile. Leadership changes, economic downturns and inter-state mistrust have weakened many of these projects. Regionalism in Latin America today is marked by institutional fatigue and strategic drift, even as the rhetoric of unity endures.¹²⁰

These varied trajectories demonstrate that regionalism is not a singular process but a plural, adaptive response to shifting global constraints. If regionalism is often about presence, in some cases it is about aspiration. Middle powers like India, Turkey, and Brazil play an increasingly complex role: they are not hegemonic, yet they shape regional outcomes disproportionately.¹²¹

In South Asia, India's dominance within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has bred asymmetry and ambivalence. As Singh observes, while India professes regional leadership, it is also seen as a reluctant integrator pursuing bilateralism over multilateralism and projecting influence with caution.¹²² This paradox has paralyzed SAARC's potential, leaving space for China to engage bilaterally in its own regional orbit. Turkey, meanwhile, has positioned itself as a cultural and strategic hinge between East and West. As Emel Parlar Dal explains, Turkey's regional engagement blends soft power and assertive diplomacy, from the Balkans to the Caucasus and the Middle East.¹²³ Yet its ambitions have often collided with regional instability and a credibility gap, particularly under shifting domestic political tides.

These cases show that middle powers can be drivers of regionalism or spoilers, depending on how they wield influence, perceive threats, and balance global versus local agendas. Nowhere is the paradox of region without regionalism more apparent than in the Middle East. Despite shared language, religion, and historical reference points, the region lacks a cohesive architecture for peace or cooperation. As Legrenzi puts it, regional

organizations in MENA exist more as symbolic gestures than functional entities, undermined by deep mistrust, ideological divides, and external entanglement.¹²⁴

This does not mean regionalism is absent. Rather, it takes unorthodox forms, such as the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance, OPEC's energy diplomacy, or temporary coalitions like the Astana group on Syria. Yet these often fragment more than they unify, lacking sustained institutional depth or collective identity.

Central Asia, on the other hand, has seen the rise of region-building through exclusion. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), as Ambrosio argues, represents a model where regionalism serves as a shield against Western liberal norms, promoting sovereignty, authoritarian solidarity, and strategic alignment among non-Western powers.¹²⁵ Here, regionalism becomes a tool for normative resistance, a quiet contest to reshape the global rules of the game from the periphery.

What emerges from these snapshots is not a singular regional order but a multiplicity of regional expressions, each shaped by its own fears, histories, and capacities. Some seek to escape hegemony; others to embody it. Some are integrationist; others are performative. Some are democratic experiments; others are realist fortresses.

Taken together, these case studies show that while regionalism may not replace global governance, it increasingly fills its gaps. This world of regions is less a map of blocs than a mosaic of imperatives, ranging from border security to economic resilience to diplomatic recognition. And in the absence of a coherent global centre, these desires are no longer marginal. They are the scaffolding of a reordered world.

The Return of Regionalism: What It Means for Global Order

If the twentieth century's international order rested on the belief that peace and stability required

a central power, a hegemon, a rigid hierarchy, or a universal set of norms, then the twenty-first century is quietly moving away from that premise. What is emerging is not an era of chaos, nor a seamless new multipolarity, but something in between: a world where power is increasingly exercised through regional channels, shaped by context, history, and proximity.

At first glance, this development might look like fragmentation. The liberal international order, once sustained by American leadership and a common ideological framework, appears increasingly frayed. In 2008, Richard Haass warned of an age of nonpolarity, where no single actor or even coherent bloc could define the rules of the system.¹²⁶ Institutions risk becoming episodic in relevance, governance uneven, and global coordination more elusive.

Yet alongside this apparent retreat from global coherence, new structures have quietly taken root. Charles Kupchan has described this shift not as disorder but as decentralization, an evolution in which regional actors assume growing responsibility for setting norms, managing disputes, and asserting agency in global affairs.¹²⁷ Rather than the disappearance of order, we may be witnessing its reconstitution at new scales and in new configurations.

This reordering is not monolithic. Regionalism means different things in different places. In some contexts, it reflects aspirations toward collective identity or developmental alignment. In others, it is shaped by security anxieties or strategic hedging. The structures themselves vary: some are robust and institutionalized, others informal and consensus driven. Some command legitimacy; others operate as shells for dominant actors. But what unites them is a shared function: providing governance at a level where global solutions have faltered.

This has theoretical consequences as well. International relations has long assumed that order requires a centre, from Hobbes' Leviathan to Waltz's structural realism.¹²⁸ But in a post-unipolar age, this logic appears increasingly strained. Instead

of concentric spheres of influence radiating from great powers, we are encountering constellations of overlapping regional arrangements, each with distinct logics and agendas. This fragmentation is not always dysfunctional. It may allow for more agile, context-sensitive forms of cooperation that global forums struggle to deliver.

At the same time, the proliferation of regional structures raises difficult questions: What happens when regions pursue conflicting norms or duplicate efforts? Who mediates between regional blocs? Can regional governance be inclusive without replicating the same hierarchies it was meant to soften? As Cunliffe argues in his return to E.H. Carr, the crisis of today's order is not only about shifting power, it is about the exhaustion of the intellectual frameworks that once sustained it.¹²⁹ In this light, regionalism offers not an answer, but a site of experimentation. It does not resolve the tensions of global governance, but it may relocate them to scales where negotiation, compromise, and trust are still possible. Regionalism, then, does not imply the end of the global. It suggests that the global must increasingly emerge through the regional as a composite assembled from below. This shift invites us to think differently about how order is built and where it is negotiated.

For scholars and policymakers alike, this shift opens a field still under construction. Regionalism is not a finished system, nor a clear solution. But it may offer a more grounded site of experimentation, one that reflects the complexity of a world increasingly defined from multiple centres, not one.

This article has argued that the global order is not simply fragmenting but reorganizing into uneven and diverse regional constellations. These constellations are shaped by historical legacies, institutional capacities, and the ambitions of middle powers navigating between global norms and local realities. Rather than a coherent regional system, what emerges is a mosaic of overlapping structures, some resilient, some fragile, that nonetheless play a growing role in shaping world affairs.

For scholars, this calls for renewed attention

to the micro-dynamics of regional cooperation beyond Eurocentric paradigms. For policymakers, it highlights the need to engage with regions not only as strategic arenas but as political actors in their own right, capable of both stabilizing and complicating

international order.



MAXIMILIAN SCHLENKER-
Research Fellow

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN EAST ASIA: SINO-JAPAN RELATIONS FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

“Chinese military attack against Taiwan could be considered as an ‘existential threat,’ thereby justifying the right of collective self-defense for Japan.”

On 7 November 2025, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi made this statement during a session of the House of Representatives Budget Committee, triggering one of the sharpest downturns in Sino-Japanese relations in decades¹³⁰. Beijing responded through grey-zone strategies across the diplomatic, economic, informational, and military domains. These included reported radar lock-on incidents involving J-15 aircraft against Japan Air Self-Defense Force F-15 fighters on December 7, 2025¹³¹; export restrictions on dual-use materials for Japanese military end-users on January 6, 2026¹³²; and symbolic cultural restrictions, such as suspensions of Japanese entertainment activities in mainland China. More than three months later, tensions have shown little sign of abating. Tokyo continues to pursue what it calls strategic autonomy. In this context, strategic autonomy does not mean breaking away from the U.S.-Japan alliance, but rather strengthening it while equipping it with the capacity to exercise collective self-defense within the alliance. Japan’s 2025 Defense White Paper explains that strategic autonomy is grounded in the development of stand-off defense capabilities, enabling Japan to operate beyond the range of potential threats. It also emphasizes that missile defense alone is insufficient and that counterstrike capabilities are necessary to deter and halt further attacks. In practical terms, this involves expanding long-range missile systems, strengthening intelligence and surveillance assets, and improving integrated command-and-control structures within the U.S.-Japan alliance framework.¹³³ Beijing, by contrast, portrays Japan’s expanding security role as a challenge to the post-war order and frames it within its national rejuvenation. This paper argues that the current

confrontation is structurally compatible, that the conflict is not generated by short-term misunderstandings but by long-term alignment of historical grievance, geopolitical disputes, and the U.S. alliance. These three pillars mutually reinforce one another, thereby accelerating escalation. Hence, based on three pillars, the analysis clarifies why Sino-Japanese friction resonates with broader European debates over strategic autonomy and historical responsibility.

Historical Narratives

Both China’s and Japan’s contemporary political positions are rooted in each state’s interpretation of its own historical experience. While Japan is attempting to move beyond the constraints of its wartime past by reframing historical memory, China continues to instrumentalize history as a political weapon in both its domestic and foreign policy.

Japan

Following its defeat in World War II, Japan faced internal and external constraints that shaped Japan’s postwar foreign policy. Internally, Article 9’s renunciation of war and the self-imposed restrictions on militarization gained public support, shaped by the deep trauma of atomic bombings and World War II. Externally, the Potsdam Declaration imposed strict limitations on Japan’s military power. These restrictions on Japan’s defense led Tokyo to pursue a policy, which later came to be known as the Yoshida Doctrine. The Yoshida Doctrine rests the core of national strategy on maintaining a minimal defense, relying on the U.S. alliance for security, and prioritizing economic growth. The plan was enabled by shared interests with the U.S. under the 1951 U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, which provided for Japan’s military security and supported a containment policy against Soviet

and Chinese expansion into the Pacific. Thus, the Yoshida Doctrine was a strategic circumscription. It limited military power, minimized the use of force in international affairs, maximized economic recovery, and relied on U.S. alliance protection.

However, the end of the Cold War began to unsettle Japan's postwar strategy. The 1991 Gulf War marked a turning point. In response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Tokyo contributed \$13 billion to the Gulf Peace Fund as a means of protecting international peace and justice.¹³⁴ Despite making it one of the largest financial contributors among coalition-supporting states, Japan was criticized for 'too little, too late' and that Tokyo did not provide its human resources for the war. This episode of 'checkbook diplomacy' exposed the limits of non-military engagement in a post-Cold War order, thereby questioning Japan's role in international security.

Security pressures intensified more directly in the late 1990s. North Korea and China expanded their military capabilities, reshaping East Asian security dynamics. In August 1998, North Korea's Taepodong-1 missile flew over Japanese territory to the Pacific Ocean, producing a sharp rise in security threat¹³⁵. Meanwhile, China's military modernization and economic growth altered the regional balance of power. In 2010, China's GDP (\$6,192,565 million) surpassed Japan's (\$5,759,072 million), pushing Japan from second to third place globally¹³⁶. These external pressures increased concern about Japan's position in the international order, contributing to a gradual shift from cautious dependence toward more proactive security participation. Public opinion evolved alongside these external changes. Fewer than 40 percent of respondents perceived a risk of war in 1967, but that figure rose to 54.9 percent in 1997 and exceeded 80 percent by 2024^{137;138}. As the public acknowledgement of external threats intensified, the demand for Japan to assume a more active security role grew.¹³⁹

These societal shifts created the foundation for a reinterpretation of Japan's security policy. The central question was no longer whether Japan should rely on the alliance, but how actively it should operate within it. Shinzo Abe, the Prime Minister of Japan, introduced the concept of an

'existential threat' in the 2015 security legislation, which made the limited exercise of collective self-defense constitutionally possible. This reinterpretation did not abandon the alliance framework, but repositioned Japan within it. Japan signaled that it would no longer confine itself to minimal self-defense, but would contribute more directly to shaping regional security. This trajectory becomes more explicit under Takaichi Sanae. Whereas Abe's reinterpretation established the legal possibility of collective self-defense under the abstract category of an 'existential threat,' Takaichi moves beyond ambiguity by stating that a Taiwan contingency is Japan's contingency. At the same time, Takaichi's approach to historical issues reflects a reassessment of postwar constraints. By questioning postwar statements such as the 1994 Murayama Statement, she suggests reshaping Japan's historical responsibility in its security discourse. Taken together, these developments suggest that Japan's strategic autonomy is not a sudden revisionist departure from the postwar order. Rather, it reflects a gradual transformation in national identity and threat perception, one that seeks greater military and political agency within the U.S.-Japan alliance, while reassessing the historical constraints that once defined Japan's security posture.

China

While Japan has sought to move beyond the postwar order through a gradual reinterpretation of its historical and security frameworks, China has pursued a different approach. Rather than loosening the weight of the past, Beijing has reinforced it. At the core of this strategy lies the 'century of humiliation' (1839-1949), a historical narrative that begins with the First Opium War and the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing between the Qing dynasty and the United Kingdom, followed by subsequent interventions by Western powers and, later, Japanese imperial expansion.¹⁴⁰ In the late twentieth century, especially from the 1990s, this memory was systematically institutionalized by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).¹⁴¹ The Chinese Communist Party has maintained that the end of the "century of humiliation" was achieved under its leadership and emphasizes that China will not permit foreign interference in its sovereignty in the

future.

China used historical narratives to reinforce public sentiment, so thus strengthen nationalism. Through the Patriotic Education Campaign, the narrative of imperialist aggression was embedded in school curricula, museums, memorial days, and public discourse. Within the framework, the CCP and the People's Liberation Army are portrayed as the forces that ended humiliation. Historical grievance thus becomes closely tied to regime legitimacy and political authority. This narrative is further employed in the cultural sphere. So-called 'main melody' (主旋律) films and television dramas, heavily supported by the state, often focus on resistance against Japanese invasion and the suffering of the Chinese people during wartime.¹⁴² These productions promote themes of sacrifice, unity, and national revival. By linking contemporary politics with memories of foreign aggression, they strengthen nationalist sentiment and reinforce public support for the Party's leadership.

The century of humiliation remains a central point in Chinese political and diplomatic discourse. Within this framework, Taiwan is portrayed not as a separate political entity, but as a legacy of foreign intervention during the century of humiliation. Reunification is therefore framed as a process of historical restoration rather than territorial expansion. In the 'One China' principle, China designates Taiwan as a 'core interest,' thereby considering the issue as a non-negotiable matter. The 2022 white paper, *The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era*, further solidifies this position by rejecting foreign interference and justifying the use of necessary measures, including military force, to safeguard national unity.¹⁴³ Beyond the Taiwan issue, under the broader slogan of 'national rejuvenation', the century of humiliation functions as a continuing lens through which contemporary security matters are interpreted. Within this context, Japan's expanding security role is viewed as an attempt to revive imperialist practices during the century of humiliation.

The contrast is therefore structural. While Japan debates how to interpret the constraints of its postwar order, China continues to foreground

historical grievances as a source of political legitimacy and justification in shaping its external policies.

Unresolved territorial issues: First Island Chain

Territorial disputes in East Asia cannot be separated from the region's unresolved historical narratives. Dmitry Streltsov has noted that the conflict structure of East Asia fundamentally differs from that of Europe.¹⁴⁴ While contemporary conflicts in Europe, exemplified by the war in Ukraine, are largely rooted in the legacy of the Cold War, territorial disputes in East Asia can be traced back to the colonial era or earlier. These unresolved historical grievances remain embedded in public consciousness and hence become the ideological narrative of East Asian countries. As a result, territorial disputes in East Asia are not merely diplomatic disagreements; they constitute the frontline of a structural clash shaped by centuries of unresolved history. Unlike Europe, where the Helsinki Final Act consolidated the principle of the inviolability of borders, East Asia's geopolitics is still shaped by the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty, which failed to clearly delineate the boundaries of territories Japan relinquished.

Senkaku Islands and Taiwan

A prominent example is the dispute over the Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu Islands in China, Diaoyutai Islands in Taiwan).¹⁴⁵ Japan currently administers the islands and maintains that the administrative control was returned to Tokyo in 1972 under the Okinawa Reversion Agreement with the United States.¹⁴⁶ China, by contrast, claims historical sovereignty over the islands, arguing that they were discovered and incorporated into Chinese territory during the Ming Dynasty. For decades, Beijing has treated the area as politically sensitive and has expanded the China Coast Guard (CCG) and the maritime militia, using grey-zone strategies. For Tokyo, this is a matter of sovereignty, as grey-zone pressures directly challenge the credibility of deterrence.

The Taiwan issue is even more central. In China's 2022 white paper on Taiwan, China rejected the legal validity of the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty, arguing that the People's Republic of

China and the Soviet Union were excluded from the signing process, thereby violating the principles of international law. Instead, Beijing emphasizes earlier international documents, such as the Cairo Declaration (1943) and the Potsdam Declaration (1945), as the legitimate foundation for postwar territorial settlement. China has also included Taiwan as its 'core interest,' exposing that sovereignty over the island is non-negotiable.

First Island Chain

The territorial disputes over the Senkaku Islands and Taiwan both share common geopolitical significance when viewed through the concept of the 'First Island Chain.' Originally articulated in U.S. Cold War strategy in the 1950s, the term refers to a chain extending from the Japanese archipelago through the Ryukyu Islands and Taiwan to the Philippines. For Washington, it functioned as a line of containment against Soviet and Chinese expansion. From the 1980s onward, however, the term was interpreted by Chinese expansionists as a significant obstacle to be overcome in pursuit of expanding economic, diplomatic, and maritime influence in the Pacific.

For Beijing, the first island chain is the key obstacle to its great rejuvenation. Beyond immediate economic considerations, the First Island Chain is also closely linked to China's long-term global connectivity strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013. The initiative seeks to expand China's economic, technological, and infrastructural links with developing regions, including through large-scale investments and digital connectivity projects. The projects include the construction of digital communication infrastructure between China and the Global South, as well as substantial investment in underdeveloped countries. From Beijing's perspective, constraints imposed by the First Island Chain limit the efficiency, security, and scalability of these ambitions.

From Japan's standpoint, maintaining stability along the chain is essential. Militarily, a successful Chinese expansion beyond the chain would enable Chinese forces to influence Japan's southwestern islands, thereby destabilizing the regional balance of power. Economically, Japan's

dependence on manufacturing and exports makes protecting sea lines of communication (SLOCs) a national priority. While Japan heavily relies on imported oil, much of which passes through the Taiwan Strait and the Bashi Channel, instability of the region can directly threaten Japan's economic security.¹⁴⁷

The cases of the Senkaku Islands and Taiwan demonstrate how unresolved territorial disputes persistently shape contemporary security dynamics in East Asia. These disputes are no longer confined to questions of territorial ownership alone; they are increasingly intertwined with geopolitical sovereignty and economic interests. As a result, both China and Japan find it structurally difficult to avoid confrontation.

The United States

Japan

The United States has long encouraged Japan's rearmament as part of its broader strategy to contain Soviet and, later, Chinese expansion in the Pacific. After the Cold War, however, questions emerged regarding the future purpose of the U.S.-Japan alliance. In October 2000, a report by the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) argued that the alliance needed to shift from simple burden-sharing toward power-sharing, calling for Japan to assume greater strategic responsibility.¹⁴⁸ Today, this strategic adjustment takes place in a different regional environment. The United States remains a major security actor in East Asia, but China's rapid military modernization has narrowed the gap that once gave Washington clear dominance in the region.

In line with U.S. expectations, Japan has steadily increased its defense budget and expanded its military capabilities. In 2018, Tokyo announced the Medium-Term Defense Program (2019-2022) to strengthen its overall defense capabilities. By 2026, Japan's defense budget reached ¥9.0353 trillion, an 81.2 per cent increase from 2016. Beyond budgetary expansion, Japan has prioritized the development of counterstrike capabilities, including the deployment of Type 12 long-range missiles with ranges of approximately 900-1,200 km.¹⁴⁹

China's growing military capabilities have increased uncertainty about the extent and cost of U.S. intervention, thereby reshaping Japan's strategic calculations. This shift was further accelerated during the Trump administration. The emphasis on 'America First' signaled a desire to reduce U.S. security burdens and encouraged allies to assume greater responsibility for their own defense. The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy reflects this approach by stressing shared responsibility in responding to China's expanding economic and military power.

From Tokyo's perspective, expanding its security role constitutes the framework for Tokyo's strategic autonomy within the US-Japan alliance. By strengthening its defense ability and linking contingencies such as Taiwan directly to Japan's own security, Tokyo aims to position itself as a more active security actor along the First Island Chain.

China

From Beijing's perspective, however, the shift in the U.S.-Japan alliance in the Indo-Pacific is often interpreted as part of a broader network of alliances aimed at constraining China's rise. What Tokyo describes as burden-sharing and regional stabilization is frequently framed in Beijing as a form of strategic encirclement directed at China. If Japan expands its security role under the concept of strategic autonomy, other U.S. allies, such as South Korea and Australia could also become more deeply involved in regional security affairs.

China has therefore grown increasingly cautious of the strengthening of the U.S.-Japan alliance and the expansion of the U.S.-led alliance network in the Indo-Pacific. In response, Beijing has employed a range of measures to counter the U.S.-led alliance network in the region. These include the use of grey-zone strategies and economic pressure against the U.S. allies, as well as continued military modernization to raise the cost of potential U.S. intervention in East Asia.

A central element of China's response to potential U.S. military intervention in East Asia has been the development of anti-access and area denial

(A2AD) capabilities. A2AD refers to a military strategy designed to prevent an adversary from entering a specific operational area. China's A2AD structure consists of several components, including long-range ballistic and cruise missile systems capable of targeting U.S. aircraft carriers and regional air bases, modernized naval forces and submarines, and non-kinetic capabilities such as cyber operations and anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons that disrupt the C4ISR networks on which U.S. military operations depend.¹⁵⁰ Through the expansion of these capabilities, China seeks to increase the cost and risk of U.S. intervention in geopolitical affairs within East Asia.

Conclusion

The confrontation between China and Japan is not the result of a single political statement. It is rooted in structural factors. Historical memory, unresolved territorial disputes, and alliance politics interact and reinforce one another. In this context, history is not only remembered but actively used as a weapon. Both China and Japan rely on interpreting historical narratives to justify their present security policies. If Japan moves to shape a new regional order in East Asia by revisiting postwar constraints and taboos, China relies on its long-established historical narrative to restrain Japan's advancement and legitimize its own policies. By doing so, it presents a new power dynamic in East Asia. As a result, history becomes a central element in shaping the evolving balance of power in East Asia.

Japan is the most immediate historical reference in China's narrative of the century of humiliation, but Europe is not absent from it. The narrative begins with the European intervention in the nineteenth century, including that of the British Empire and Germany. Although the European Union is not identical to those former imperial powers, this historical legacy remains embedded in Chinese political discourse. For this reason, the EU may also be placed within broader claims of external pressure when political or economic tensions arise. The issue is therefore not only about military balance, but about how history structures political meaning in contemporary power relations. In recent years, the EU has called for strategic autonomy¹⁵¹, including stronger military capabilities

and greater defense coordination. As both Japan and EU member states reconsider postwar constraints and expand their security roles, similar patterns of interpretation may emerge in China's strategic discourse.

The Sino-Japanese case is not simply a

regional issue. It reflects a broader transformation in the postwar international order. As nations reassess postwar constraints and redefine their security roles within alliance systems, historical narratives become central tools for interpreting legitimacy.



HANSUNG RYU

A SMALL STATE PUTTING UP A BIG FRONT

RWANDA'S AUTHORITARIAN EXTRAVERSION AND THE RWANDA-UK RELATIONSHIP

Introduction

Small states are often seen as relatively irrelevant, being viewed as weak, limited in their actions and doomed to go along with the frames imposed by larger, and therefore more powerful, states.¹⁵² However, in the 21st century, small states are more prominent and visible than ever as a permissive, globalized and multipolar international system has arisen.¹⁵³ This new context has created space for small states to set regional and global agendas, thus lending itself to using a discursive constructivist approach to analyze the strategies of small states.¹⁵⁴ This is, for instance, the case with the study of status in IR. Status is sometimes viewed as a hierarchy where larger and more relevant states are on top, making it mostly profitable for larger powerful states. However, in *Moral authority and status in International Relations*, Wohlforth, de Carvalho, Leira, and Neumann introduce a new approach to status. They argue that status and status-seeking pervade the entire international system and have relevance for small states. Status in their view is *positional*, determining what position a state has in groups, *perceptual*, as it is connected to self-perception and perception by others, and *social*, as it influences a state's position in networks of social relations. In this view, status is something small states can achieve in different ways and which they can use to influence bigger states.¹⁵⁵

This paper seeks to test this idea by analyzing the case study of how post-genocide Rwanda, under Paul Kagame, has acquired status to influence its relationship with the UK. I will ask the question: What were Rwanda's possible strategies for increasing status and influencing perception in the UK between 1994 and 2026? Rwanda is an interesting case as it is a small state by most measures, having a population of under 14 million, a GDP of 13.1 billion USD in 2022 and an army of 35,000 in 2020.¹⁵⁶ Despite this, it appears that Rwanda has remarkable margins for maneuver. Rwanda has long been a dictatorship with

a record of human rights violations and an aggressive foreign policy, including support for rebels in the DRC. Rwanda appears to have special status as it has received large amounts of aid and is consistently praised by Western countries, especially the UK, as an important security provider and example of economic development.¹⁵⁷

I will use 'authoritarian extraversion' as my analytical framework. This theory was introduced by Cédric Jourde and uses a constructivist approach to explain how weak authoritarian states in the Global South can exert influence in their relationships with powerful Western democracies. It fills a lacuna in the literature on the relationship between these two types of states. Existing literature often ignores the role of the smaller authoritarian states. Simply viewing them as responding to pressure from larger states, whose interests determine whether a regime is supported or coerced. 'Authoritarian extraversion' argues that authoritarian states can, by framing their own policies and situation, confront dominant discourses, like security, and influence larger states to increase support and/or reduce pressure. In other words, this entails framing domestic situations and policies in order to gain status.¹⁵⁸

Rwanda's framing efforts

Arguably, Rwanda's main avenue for 'authoritarian extraversion' concerns the framing of its own economic development. Already in the late 90's, the Rwandan government attempted to frame itself as successfully utilizing foreign aid to further reconstruction and development. In 2000, meanwhile, the Rwandan government revealed Vision 2020, an ambitious strategy for Rwanda's development into a low-middle-income economy by 2020. Purporting to mean to 'transform our country into a middle-income nation in which Rwandans are healthier, educated and generally more prosperous'. A Rwanda that is 'competitive both regionally and

globally'. Rwanda quickly claimed success for its economic strategy. In the foreword of the 2012 version of Vision 2020, it claims that the 'results speak for themselves', going on to say that Rwanda's success necessitated moving targets upwards. Rwanda, however, has overstated this progress. In 2013, Kagame already claimed Rwanda had become an economic powerhouse inspired by the Asian tigers, now being the 8th easiest place to do business worldwide. This narrative continued with Kagame claiming Rwanda has an 'unequalled' record of economic performance in 2019. Essentially continuing the narrative of successful economic growth around 2020, Rwanda launched its Vision 2050 strategy for becoming a high-income economy by 2050. As the document states, Vision 2020 was about 'what we had to do in order to survive and regain our dignity. But Vision 2050 has to be about the future we choose'. This brought the narrative to its next phase, essentially claiming Rwanda's economic policies had already successfully turned it into a low-middle-income economy, and the goal of becoming a high-income economy within 30 years was realistic.

That this is an active framing tactic fitting with 'authoritarian extraversion' can clearly be seen. Kagame and the Rwandan government have been proactive in promoting the narrative of growth. For instance, by networking in Western power-centers, hiring publicity firms and placing Rwandan officials into IO's.¹⁵⁹ Rwanda also seems to have manipulated data. Accusation of data manipulation started in 2015, for instance, alleging that Rwanda was underplaying its level of poverty. These allegations have continued, casting doubt on the validity of Rwanda's official statistics.¹⁶⁰ This would be no surprise, as much economic data about the Rwandan economy does not support the narrative of a low-middle-income economy. Rwanda's private sector is underdeveloped, few firms are globally connected, and poverty, lack of electricity and food insecurity are rampant. Also, Kagame and the Rwandan government have openly used their purported economic growth to defend against democratization pressure¹⁶¹. Kagame essentially made this clear at the 2012 African Economic Conference in response to Western criticism, claiming Rwanda's growth and many successes, like educating girls, investing in infrastructure and communications, show that it

should not be criticized.¹⁶²

Rwanda's framing of its security initiatives has complemented its economic framing tactics. Since 1994, it has strengthened its military, which, despite its small size, has become an experienced, well-equipped, and integrated force. Starting in 2005, Rwanda began sending troops on UN missions, becoming the 2nd biggest contributor in Africa between 2005 and 2020. Since 2020, Rwanda has also started sending out unilateral missions, namely to the CAR and Mozambique.¹⁶³ These initiatives, since 2005, have been paired with an active effort by Rwanda to frame itself as an effective military force which opposes genocide and crimes against humanity, arguably giving itself a 'hero-like' status.¹⁶⁴ Narratively, Rwanda has promoted its missions, particularly its unilateral ones after 2020, as being an 'African solution to African problems' and a part of its mission to provide 'a Rwandan military solution to security problems'.¹⁶⁵

These framing efforts can also be seen as an example of 'authoritarian extraversion'. They serve to increase Rwanda's international and regional legitimacy and recognition as a secure country that takes international responsibility and provides security to other African states. Specifically for the West, they have made Rwanda seem like a reliable security partner in Africa.¹⁶⁶ Rwanda has often used its security initiatives and image as a security provider as a response to criticism of its poor human rights and democracy record. For instance, by threatening to withdraw troops or by asserting that it is a defender of human rights. Interestingly, interactions with powerful Western states have often featured references to the genocide in Rwanda. This seems to be implicitly meant to remind the international community of its inaction during the 1994 genocide, compelling them to support Rwanda.¹⁶⁷

The UK's reception of the Rwandan frame

The UK's response is an interesting case study of the dynamics that 'authoritarian extraversion' can create. Its relationship with Rwanda is particularly interesting because it used to have no relation to Rwanda pre-genocide. Over the last 30 years, however, the UK has become Rwanda's second most important Western supporter. Rwanda has profited

greatly as the UK has aided it in its security and development. For the UK, meanwhile, Rwanda has become an example of successful aid-utilization, anticorruption policies and market-oriented reform. The UK has also worked with Rwanda in various security initiatives to further its interests and strengthen security in the region.¹⁶⁸ To analyze the extent to which Rwanda's frames have been adopted by the UK, a chronological account of their relationship will be given.

The UK and Rwanda began developing a relationship during the 90's and 2000's under Prime Ministers Major and Blair. This entailed increasing UK aid to Rwanda to aid its development, as well as increased security cooperation. Rwanda took great initiative in this relationship, actively shaping positive narratives which convinced inexperienced British officials to support increased relations. When Rwanda invaded the DRC in the late 90's, this invasion, as well as accusations of illegal mining, caused the UK to withdraw aid, though it was quickly restored.¹⁶⁹ Here, one can see the first example of the UK implicitly taking on the Rwandan narrative of impressive economic growth.

This happened more explicitly when UK-Rwandan relations reached a new high with Rwanda's joining of the Commonwealth in 2009. In the run-up to this event in 2008, the CHRI posted a report which dented Rwanda's hopes by pointing out its undemocratic governance and human rights violations. The Rwandan government responded that Rwanda had 'made phenomenal progress that surpasses many Commonwealth countries that did not go through a small fraction of what Rwanda went through'.¹⁷⁰ The UK continued to support Rwanda's membership, apparently accepting its narrative. Prime Minister Brown expressed his support for Rwanda joining, repeating the narrative of Rwanda being a nation ravaged by genocide, now making 'remarkable progress' because of the 'efforts of President Kagame and others'.¹⁷¹

During the 2010s, the UK-Rwanda relationship stayed relatively stable despite difficulties. In 2012, when Rwanda was once more accused of interfering in the DRC via the M23 rebel movement, the UK again suspended aid for a short period before resuming it. Still in 2015, the British High

Commission in Rwanda supported Rwandan activity in the DRC, stating that Rwanda's combating of the FDLR in the Eastern DRC was justified, labeling the FDLR as genocide perpetrators and a destabilizing influence.¹⁷²

The UK-Rwandan relationship has arguably reached a new high in the 2020's. In June 2022, Rwanda hosted the CHOGM. This was a huge success as it allowed Rwanda to show off its progress and its relationship with the UK. Several months before, the UK and Rwanda signed the Migration and Economic Development Partnership. This entailed 120 million pounds in aid being given to Rwanda, while it would take up an unknown number of asylum seekers from the UK. This was supported by many conservative Prime Ministers, like Johnson, Truss and Sunak.¹⁷³

In its defense of this agreement from critics, the UK's government can be seen to have borrowed Rwanda's frames. Priti Patel, Home Secretary under the Johnson government, claims opponents of the deal have 'terribly misrepresented' Rwanda, which she claims has 'a good track record when it comes to refugees and stepping up to international responsibility'.¹⁷⁴ She here seems to join other British figures in supporting Rwanda's security initiatives, which are often supported in the UK because they are seen to decrease instability and therefore lessen refugee inflow.¹⁷⁵ She goes on to say that Rwanda is 'a safe and secure country with an outstanding track record' and the government is 'proud that the UK is investing in Rwanda and helping that great country to thrive', claiming that 'those who are relocated to Rwanda will have an opportunity to thrive, as well'.¹⁷⁶ Here again, Rwanda's official narrative of economic success is seen to be accepted by the UK.

The recent breakdown of UK-Rwanda relations

This final analysis section zooms in on the recent downturn in UK-Rwanda relations post-2024. The main argument is that this downturn gives great insight into the mechanism behind Rwanda's 'authoritarian extraversion'. Namely, because the downturn seems to have occurred due to two developments that caused the UK government to change its adoption of Rwandan frames. Firstly, the UK's vested interest in maintaining Rwanda's frames

eroded. Secondly, it became more difficult to uphold Rwandan frames due to the behavior of the Rwandan government. This resulted in the UK recently changing its official narrative on Rwanda's governance and scaling down its relationship with the country.

As outlined earlier in the paper, the UK had several interests in embracing Rwanda's positive framing of itself as a post-genocide success story. Fundamentally, this narrative aligned with the UK's development policies, showing how its anti-corruption and anti-regulation-oriented reforms were successful. Rwanda's cooperation with the UK on security matters also allowed it to both guarantee security in the region and further its own interests.¹⁷⁷ This mutually beneficial relationship was only strengthened by the signing of the Migration and Economic Development Partnership. This gave the conservative government of Prime Ministers Johnson and Sunak a vested interest in maintaining a positive narrative on Rwanda. Namely because it justified sending asylum seekers there. This was reflected both in the UK government's use of Rwanda's framing in its official statements and in its lack of response to the restarting of Rwandan hostilities in the DRC in 2024.¹⁷⁸

The UK's main interest in maintaining its narrative on Rwanda was undermined by the unraveling of the Migration and Economic Development Partnership. The deal faced a string of legal challenges after its signing. With a breaking point being the November 2023 UK Supreme Court ruling, finding the deal unlawful on the basis that Rwanda was in fact not a safe destination due to the risk of both onward transfer and human rights abuses. The final nail in the coffin was when, in 2024, Keir Starmer won the general election running on a platform promising to scrap the deal. Something he promptly did as he declared the deal to be "dead and buried". This turn of events undermined one of the main interests the previous conservative government had had in upholding a positive narrative on Rwanda. It also quickly led to souring relations as Rwanda refused to repay the provided funds and initiated legal action against the UK. During this episode UK spokesperson described the deal as a "complete disaster" and "never a deterrent", suggesting the UK no longer held to previous frames.¹⁷⁹

The second factor in undermining the UK's

acceptance of Rwanda's positive framing was the escalation of its aggression in the DRC. On January 31st, 2025, the M23 rebel movement, which Rwanda has long supported, advanced on Goma, the largest city in the Eastern DRC, and seized it. In this, they were supported by several thousand Rwandan troops. This was the largest escalation in the conflict in the Eastern DRC since 2012. It sparked widespread fears of a territorial war as M23 seemed poised to push the advantage and take more and more of the DRC's territory. Besides this, the escalation also had a massive humanitarian toll as many were injured or displaced. This led to an international outcry against Rwanda's action. Creating an amount of international scrutiny that made it difficult for Rwanda's erstwhile Western allies to remain silent as they had done at the restarting of hostilities several years earlier.¹⁸⁰ This situation put pressure on the UK to change its business-as-usual approach to Rwanda or risk reputational damage. Initially, the UK attempted to use diplomatic pressure, threatening to withhold specific sums of financial assistance if Rwanda did not end its involvement.¹⁸¹ When this did not happen, the UK released a statement on February 25th, 2025. In this statement, the UK called the offensives of M23 and the Rwandan army a violation of DRC sovereignty and territorial integrity and a breach of the UN Charter. It also described the humanitarian situation as 'critical', calling for Rwandan forces to withdraw from DRC territory and end hostilities.¹⁸²

With this clear statement condemning Rwanda as a violator of international law and regional destabilizer the UK essentially abandoned its support of Rwanda's positive self-presentation. This is reflected in the list of policy changes in the statement that essentially severed the close diplomatic relation between the two countries. These include ceasing high-level attendance at events hosted by Rwanda, limiting trade promotion activity, pausing most direct bilateral financial aid, coordinating with partners on potential new sanctions, suspending future defense training assistance and reviewing export licenses for the Rwanda army.¹⁸³ This action triggered an angry response from the Rwandan regime. Characterizing the UK's actions as 'punitive' and misguided, arguing that they do not address Rwanda's security concerns in the DRC and do not contribute to a solution.¹⁸⁴

Despite Rwandan efforts, the UK no longer

seems to go along with the framing of the regime, and the relationship between the two countries has not recovered. That the UK's narrative on Rwanda has shifted is reflected in the fact that the UK's later communications in Rwanda have a less positive perspective on the country than previous ones. Most recently, in its January 21, 2026, Universal Periodic Review statement, the UK still 'recognizes' Rwanda's achievements on social inclusion and gender equality. However, this recognition no longer extends to a positive outlook on the regime as a whole. As the statement goes on to outline deep concerns about restrictions on civil society and media freedom, making explicit recommendations on freedom of expression and regulatory issues. It also reiterated the UK's concerns about the regime's 'appalling human rights violations' in the DRC and elsewhere.¹⁸⁵

Conclusion

This paper asked the question: what were Rwanda's possible strategies for increasing status and influencing perception in the UK between 1994 and 2026? Specifically, it sought to use the concept of 'authoritarian extraversion' to analyze how Rwanda has framed its own development and security to influence its relationship with the UK. Rwanda is an objectively small state with seemingly enough status to retain Western support despite various transgressions. The UK is interesting, being Rwanda's second-greatest ally despite their relationship being formed entirely in the analyzed period. The goal of this article was to add value to the academic debate on the role of status in IR. Namely, by introducing 'authoritarian extraversion' as a status-seeking strategy and by introducing Rwanda as a concrete case-study for how this strategy works to gain status and influence a larger state.

In the first section, the paper shows how Rwanda, since 1994, has actively framed its security and economic development in an example of 'authoritarian extraversion'. Rwanda has created a narrative of itself as a successful economic performer. Starting with the unveiling of *Vision 2020*, and its strategy to make Rwanda a low-middle income economy by 2020. Since then, Rwanda has actively framed itself as an economic success, for instance, via PR campaigns and possibly by systematically manipulating data. Around 2020, Rwanda claimed its

low-middle-income economy had materialized, contradicting some data, and unveiled its *Vision 2050* strategy to be a high-income economy by 2050. Concerning security, Rwanda has actively contributed to UN missions since 2005, and since 2020, it has also launched unilateral security initiatives. This has served to frame Rwanda as a security partner to Western states and a defender of human rights. These narratives about both its security and development have given Rwanda a status allowing it to somewhat shrug off criticism about its lack of democracy and human rights.

In the second section, an analysis was provided of the UK's relationship with Rwanda. Here it was shown that the UK first built its relationship as a donor in the 90's based on the belief in the positive Rwandan narratives of reconstruction and growth. With Rwanda's joining the Commonwealth in 2009, this was made more explicit as the UK supported Rwanda's membership because of its narrative of growth despite its human rights violations. In 2022, Rwandan-UK relations reached a new high point with Rwanda hosting the CHOGM and the signing of the Migration and Economic Development Partnership. Government rhetoric surrounding this controversial agreement shows the UK government actively using Rwanda's narratives about its own security and economic growth as justification.

In the third section, the paper examined the limits of Rwanda's strategy by analyzing the recent downturn in UK-Rwanda relations. It argued that 'authoritarian extraversion' is a relational process dependent on continued alignment between the smaller state's framing and the larger state's interests. The unraveling of the Migration and Economic Development Partnership, following legal challenges and a conservative election loss in the UK, undermined the domestic political incentives for sustaining Rwanda's positive framing as a "safe" and responsible partner. Simultaneously, Rwanda's renewed escalation in the DRC widened the gap between its self-presentation as a stabilizing security provider and its behavior, raising the costs for the UK of maintaining Rwanda's narrative. As a result, the UK recalibrated its rhetoric and scaled back cooperation with Rwanda. This suggests that the effectiveness of 'authoritarian extraversion' depends both on overlapping interests and on the credibility of the

framed image.

To conclude, one can see here a case of how a small authoritarian state can use 'authoritarian extraversion' as a strategy to gain status and influence a larger state. By actively framing its security and development, post-genocide Rwanda seems to have successfully created a narrative of itself as an impressive economic performer and security partner. The status this has given Rwanda in the UK can be seen firstly in their long-lasting donor relationship and security partnership. It also seems instrumental in the

UK supporting Rwanda's joining of the Commonwealth and the UK signing of its controversial Migration and Economic Development Partnership. At the same time, it also shows the limits of this strategy. As the UK's interests in maintaining Rwanda's frames were undermined and Rwanda's behavior diverged from its self-presentation, the UK eventually abandoned its adoption of Rwandan framing. This suggests that while 'authoritarian extraversion' might obscure an inconvenient truth, it is not likely to indefinitely sustain an inconvenient lie.



MIDAS VAN DE WEETERING -
Publication Director,
Geschiedenis Actueel
Think-Tank

HOW TRUMP FUNDAMENTALLY ALTERED THE AMERICAN COLD WAR GRAND STRATEGY TOWARDS SOUTH KOREA

A POLICY ANALYSIS OF US POLITICAL INFLUENCE IN SOUTH KOREA BETWEEN THE COLD WAR AND THE TRUMP PRESIDENCY

Introduction

One of the key elements which allows the United States to maintain its influence around the world is its reciprocal relationships with its allies, such as the one with South Korea since the latter's founding in 1948. Through leading a UN coalition in 1950, the US helped to repel North Korea's invasion of South Korea. The US has since then helped ensure the security of the South Korean state through a mutual defence treaty signed in 1953, which legally binds the US to protect South Korean territory in case of attack.¹⁸⁶

This alliance was relatively stable and remained resilient during the Cold War (1945-1991). Nonetheless, fears of abandonment among US allies are ever-present in the background. This is why it is important for the United States to maintain its credibility. Recently, US President Donald Trump has put into question the durability of the alliance. In May 2024, Trump suggested that American troops could pull out of South Korea if the ally did not make more financial contributions to support them.¹⁸⁷

Not only does this represent a fundamental shift in the dynamics of the security relationship between the United States and its allies, with the latter becoming increasingly wary. It also represents a different grand strategy which the United States uses to exercise influence over its allies. During the Cold War, US influence was far more subtle. This meant that the United States exercised overall limited influence over South Korea, but that it succeeded in reaching its long-term goals in the country: ensuring the sustainability of an anti-communist bulwark

aligned with the United States and making South Korea a democracy. Donald Trump's grand strategy, if it can be called that, has been far more transactionalist. His goal is to extract as much short-term resource gains for the United States (without taking into account that this will undermine traditional American grand strategy victories). For the United States to be able to sustain its influence around the world, it needs to be able to reassure its allies, not extort money from them.

Thus, this policy analysis will compare US political influence in South Korea between the Cold War and the Trump Presidency. The purpose of this is to show that Trump's new strategy is fundamentally undermining the world order, which the United States has helped build up since World War 2 and hurts the United States long-term economic and security interests. It also explains how the US can reassert its influence in South Korea by supporting South Korea's people's latent desire to acquire indigenous nuclear weapons.¹⁸⁸

Analysis and Argument

During the Cold War US influence manifested itself through what the neoliberal political scientist Joseph Nye has called the three faces of relational power. First face: the use of threats or rewards to change initial preferences and strategies. Second face: controlling the agenda of actions to limit options. And third face: creating and shaping basic beliefs, perceptions, and preferences.¹⁸⁹ This strategy was far from effective in always gaining what the United States wanted. Because the United States had

historically “two contradictory objectives in South Korea: to build up South Korea as ‘a showcase for democracy’ and as an anti-communist buffer state,”¹⁹⁰ and with the latter being prioritized, American influence on the former was undermined. But if one takes a long view of it, looking at the authoritarian period of South Korean history (approximately 1948-1988), one gets quite a list of achievements.

The first face of power manifested itself for example, through the use of economic aid as a lever. In the first couple of decades of South Korean history, the country was heavily dependent on American foreign aid. In the period 1945-1949, the US military gave South Korea \$502.1 million USD of emergency aid.¹⁹¹ This fact, along with the United States having operational control of the South Korean armed forces through the United Nations Command in the 1950s, enabled the US to limit, but not eliminate, South Korean President Syngman Rhee’s (1948-1960) use of the military for political repression.¹⁹² The second dimension of power, controlling the agenda of actions to limit options, was used during the Korean War armistice negotiations of 1953. The United States refused to humour Rhee’s desire to invade North Korea.¹⁹³ In exchange for the military alliance, the United States got Rhee to back off and ensured the long-term survival of the South Korean state.

The economic aid manifested as the first face of power would prove to be a more successful lever for influence over Rhee’s successor Park Chung-hee (1961-1979). In 1963, when Park broke his promise that he would hold free elections and stated that he would extend military rule, US Secretary of State Dean Rusk warned that the United States could be forced to publicly oppose the continuation of the junta and reconsider its support of the Park government. Park backed off and subsequently won relatively free and fair elections in 1963 by a slim margin.¹⁹⁴

Naturally, as the South Korean economy grew and its military power increased in the 1960s and 1970s, the country became less dependent on US economic aid and military presence. This means that US leverage over South Korea has declined over time. This is what allowed Park to become much more repressive in the Yushin years (1972-1979) and ignore Carter’s threats to reduce the US military presence over human rights concerns.¹⁹⁵

US influence nonetheless continued under Park’s successor, Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1988). Around the time of Reagan’s visit to Seoul in 1983, State Department officials held talks with South Korean counterparts where they made the case for liberalising trade, foreign investment and finance. As a result, Chun began the process of denationalising commercial banks and reforming industrial policy. The US thus used the third face power, by shaping Chun’s basic beliefs, perceptions and preferences, to wield influence over South Korea’s economic policy. This had a long-run political effect. Economic liberalisation decreased dependence on the state for big business, the entrepreneurial class and the middle class. This made South Korean business leaders more sympathetic to the political opposition by the late 1980s.¹⁹⁶

Following rumours in 1987 that Chun would renege on his promise to step down the following year to facilitate democratization, the Reagan administration decided to be bold. Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Gaston J. Sigur Jr. made a speech in New York in support of South Korean democratization. Secretary of State George Schultz then met with Chun and emphasized that the Reagan administration supported Chun’s determination to step down the following year.¹⁹⁷ With the decline of communism as a threat in the late 1980s, the US shifted its priority in South Korea towards supporting the liberalization and democratization of the country.¹⁹⁸

That is not to say that US actions were the primary reason for the democratization of South Korea in 1987-1988. The South Korean people’s growing democracy movement was more important. However, the United States’ subtle support for this certainly helped. If the United States had tried to be more domineering and threatening, its grand strategy and the dual goals of anti-communism and democracy could have been substantially undermined in the long run.

Keeping the need for subtlety in mind due to the risk of arousing resentment among the South Korean government and recognizing the inexorable relative decline of American leverage over time, puts Trump’s policy actions in a stark light. Evolving

internal politics in South Korea also play a role in this. During the authoritarian period of South Korea, the country's policy aim of being exclusively aligned with the United States was stable. Rhee, Park, and Chun were all conservatives. The conservative electorate in South Korea is traditionally very pro-American and anti-communist (including being hawks on North Korea). However, two things changed this dynamic. First, South Korea's diplomatic normalization of relations with the Soviet Union in 1990 and China in 1992¹⁹⁹ reflected a diversification of ties towards non-Western great powers.

Second, the coming to power of progressive South Korean presidents, beginning with Kim Dae-jung in 1998-2003, signified the rising importance of the progressive electorate in South Korea, who were more internationalist and were seeking more strategic autonomy within the alliance.²⁰⁰ Additionally, starting with Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy, progressive South Korean leaders pursued a new approach towards North Korea, sometimes at odds with United States policies. This was the strategy of seeking to achieve inter-Korean reconciliation and reunification through increasing inter-Korean engagement by expanding economic relations between North and South Korea to help transform the security environment of the Northeast Asian region, with the hope that this would lead to a gradual peaceful change within North Korea as the North increased engagement with the global community. However, the coming to power of US President George W. Bush (2001-2009) meant US skepticism and hostility towards North Korea. This US opposition contributed to the failure of South Korea getting the international community to support the Sunshine Policy.²⁰¹ It should be added that the Sunshine Policy, as has been noted by Professor Victor Cha in his book the *Impossible State*, was doomed to failure from the start, as the totalitarian regime of the Kim Dynasty in North Korea had no intention of permitting gradual peaceful change, which ensured the neutering of the Sunshine Policy in practice.²⁰² Nonetheless, because the United States has restrained South Korea's ability to pursue nuclear weapons for its own security, diplomatic diversification is considered more effective than deterrence in the mind of some South Koreans to maintain the country's security.

South Korea's interest in seeking alternative

ties with other countries has most recently materialized through current South Korean President Lee Jae-myung meeting with the Chinese Premier Li Qiang. Lee called for the expansion of economic trade ties between China and South Korea, declaring "I shared an understanding with President Xi Jinping that Korea and China should work together to mature the strategic cooperative partnership between our two countries, grounded in political trust between governments and friendly trust between our peoples."²⁰³ The South Korean regime, even when it is run by a progressive president, has never been overtly hostile towards the United States. Both South Korean conservative and progressive administrations continue to maintain the Mutual Defense Treaty.²⁰⁴ Nonetheless, following the United States capture of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, the *Korea Times* (a centre-left newspaper in South Korea) chief editorial writer Shim Jae-yun released an article saying that Trump's actions are raising strategic questions for South Korea. "The credibility of U.S leadership rests not only on power projection, but on its ability to reassure partners that their security interests will not be subordinated to broader geopolitical competition."²⁰⁵

Trump's strategy of transactionalism through relying exclusively on a crude version of the first face of power of naked coercion does work sometimes in producing short-term economic gains. Trump's repeated questioning of the US-South Korean alliance can help explain why South Korean payments for the stationing of US troops in South Korea have been increasing during the Trump and Biden administrations.²⁰⁶ In November 2025 Trump and Lee announced a Joint Fact Sheet reaffirming the historic Korea Strategic Trade and Investment Deal, with the concessions mainly coming from the South Korean side. This included South Korea committing to eliminating "the 50,000-unit cap on U.S.-originating Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS)-compliant vehicles that can enter Korea without further modifications."²⁰⁷

Something that is interesting to note is an odd correlation. The unilateralist American presidents' time in office, such as W. Bush and Trump, tend to coincide with progressive South Korean administrations. Such South Korean presidents, like Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, Moon Jae-in, and Lee

Jae-myung, were far less diehard pro-United States than the conservative Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) and Yoon Suk-yeol (2022-2025) presidencies. A case can be made that post-Cold War American unilateralism and transactionalism encourages South Koreans to vote for less pro-American leaders, who support the deepening of ties with American rivals such as China and North Korea.

For the United States to be able to better manage its geopolitical tensions with China and North Korea, it needs to ensure the sustainability of the US-South Korean alliance. It also needs to convince South Korea that it is sincere in doing so. Extracting as much as possible from South Korea drives the country into the arms of its most important strategic rival: China. Now, just because progressive South Koreans want to increase ties with North Korea, it does not mean that the United States ought to support this.

Nonetheless, the United States has one card to play that would reassure South Korea of the US commitment to the country and South Korea's autonomy (and would thus make it feel less of a need to economically deepen its ties with China): support South Korea acquiring nuclear weapons. The fact of the matter is that 76% of South Koreans support their country acquiring indigenous nuclear weapons.²⁰⁸ There is a certain irony to this. It was after all the United States who successfully pressured Park Chung-hee to abandon his pursuit of nuclear weapons.²⁰⁹ Even so, the geopolitical landscape has changed. One of the biggest ironies of the Sunshine Policy (1998-2008), was that North Korea successfully tested an atomic bomb in October 2006.²¹⁰ South Korea is a

party to the non-proliferation treaty and would need to withdraw from it to be able to pursue nuclear weapons without contravening international law.²¹¹

Historically, any country that pursues nuclear weapons risks becoming an international pariah, as North Korea has become. For the United States itself, it could result in calls of hypocrisy from its rivals. The non-proliferation consensus on the UN Security Council against new countries acquiring nuclear weapons would make South Korean internationalists reluctant to try this bold move. If the United States threw its weight behind its ally, South Korea might come to see the United States in a more positive light. Additionally, it would strengthen South Korea's negotiating position vis-à-vis North Korea when it comes to denuclearizing the latter. As Robert E. Kelly and Min-hyung Kim wrote in an article in *Foreign Affairs*: "the bomb is the best way to contain the threat from the North."²¹² Countries' leaders are relatively rational. They would think twice to flippantly threaten a country that can retaliate in kind. Furthermore, it was North Korea who first crossed the line when it acquired nuclear weapons, with China and Russia's acquiescence. It is thus perfectly legitimate for the United States to condone South Korea to do the same.

If the United States wants to maintain long-term influence in South Korea to be able to achieve its long-term great power geostrategic imperatives, its foreign policy needs to draw on lessons from the Cold War: be more subtle, less coercive and more encouraging. The United States should encourage South Korea to get the bomb.



WILLIAM PIRAS

CHINA'S GREAT WALL OF SAND MEETS INTERNATIONAL LAW

ARTIFICIAL ISLANDS AND THE PERMANENT COURT OF ARBITRATION'S SOUTH CHINA SEA ARBITRATION CASE BETWEEN THE PHILIPPINES AND CHINA: 2013-2016

Introduction

One of the most fraught geopolitical issues in recent years has been tensions between China and Southeast Asian countries over the territorial jurisdiction of the South China Sea, and all that is within it. A huge semi-enclosed sea covering around 3.5 million square kilometres, it is bordered by China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore and Indonesia.²¹³ One of these countries, the Philippines, decided on 22 January 2013 to formally submit a legal dispute before international arbitration when it initiated arbitration proceedings against China in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This was put before the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), which reached its decision of territorial adjudication on 12 July 2016.²¹⁴

UNCLOS was originally adopted in 1982 and has established a sweeping regime of international law in the governance of the world's oceans, seas and the resources within them.²¹⁵ Since UNCLOS came into force in 1994, the PCA has served as a registry for 14 arbitrations in accordance with Annex VII of UNCLOS. UNCLOS does not limit itself to matters such as sovereignty, rights of usage in maritime zones, and navigation rights. Its treaty also ensures "the conservation and equitable usage of resources and the marine environment" and ensures "the protection and preservation of the living resources of the sea."²¹⁶ As this case study will demonstrate, questions of sovereignty and rights of usage in maritime zones are often interlinked with global environmental governance questions. The international relations scholar Gracia Abal-Quintanal has demonstrated this in her paper *The Declaration of the South China Sea as a Global Common*. The concept of Global Commons posits, "as defined by the United Nations

Environment Programme, to areas or resources outside the control of any particular nation state, but on which many depend or at least benefit. The existence of such spaces can be enormously favourable for trade, communication, governance and, in short, the functioning and stability of the international order."²¹⁷ Citing Quilligan, she lays out three sets of elements that can be considered as part of the category of the global commons: (1) the noosphere (e.g., culture, traditions, communities, associations, rights of certain groups), (2) the biosphere (e.g., fishing, agriculture, land forests) and (3) the physiosphere (e.g., minerals, energy, water). On the basis of these sets of elements, Abdal-Quintal has argued that the South China Sea should be considered a global common.²¹⁸

Kate O'Neill has discussed several international relations theories within the context of global environmental politics in her book *The Environment and International Relations*. The idea of the Global Commons is complementary to the neoliberal institutionalist school of international relations. Neoliberal institutionalism argues that international cooperation can be a solution to the free-rider problem, where states cheat on international agreements to derive benefits without paying the costs of the agreement. Institutions can thus be set up to help realise joint gains by monitoring compliance, increasing transparency, decreasing the transaction costs of cooperation and preventing most cheating.²¹⁹ An intergovernmental organisation like the PCA would certainly qualify as such an institution for the enforcement of the Global Commons norm. This sounds good in theory. However, this conflicts with the realist school of international relations on a conceptual (and in this case practical) level, which argues that states have little interest in abiding by intergovernmental organisations trying to enforce

norms like the Global Commons.²²⁰ This essay will use the historical case of the South China Sea Arbitration ruling as a practical case study for these international relations (IR) theories.

Around the same time this international arbitration was taking place between 2013 and 2016 (which China boycotted), China was engaging in what the American Admiral Harry Harris declared in 2015 to be a “great wall of sand.”²²¹ The Great Wall of Sand involved large-scale land reclamation, which is defined as the process of creating new land from the sea, in the South China Sea (SCS) by China. As a result, China built man-made islands to bolster its sweeping Nine-Dash Line (NDL), which claimed 85% of the SCS as Chinese territory.^{222, 223} The literature written about the territorial disputes in the South China Sea has been extensive, with many books having explored its political, legal and military aspects. Youngmin Seo’s 2024 book *The South China Sea Dispute as International Law and Politics* has explored multiple actors’ perspectives, separating them into the Chinese and Western legal views.²²⁴ Clive Schofield has explored the legal status of islands in the International Law of the Sea in his 2021 book *The Regime of Islands Reframed*.²²⁵ Pooja Bhatt, in her 2024 book *The Nine Dash Line*, has examined China’s own behaviour in the South China Sea and its relations with its Southeast Asian competitors.²²⁶

However, I will argue that one missed opportunity in the historiography of the South China Sea that should be homed in on is how the creation of artificial islands aligns (or does not) with international law and global environmental governance through challenging the Global Commons norm and what practical implications this has for global environmental governance. To explore this issue, I will use two main documents as primary sources. First, the 1982 UNCLOS treaty, which entered into force in 1994.²²⁷ This treaty has been signed and ratified by both China and the Philippines, the two pertinent countries of this paper. Second, I will use the 2016 PCA Award decision of the South China Sea Arbitration between the Philippines and China, including the court’s interpretation and application of UNCLOS to this dispute.²²⁸ It should be noted, despite China boycotting the proceedings, that both it and the Philippines are contracting parties to the PCA’s 1907 founding convention.²²⁹ Thus, the levels

of analysis for this paper used are the system of the intergovernmental organisations UNCLOS and the PCA and the state units of China and the Philippines. Focusing on these two countries specifically means that other players involved in the South China Sea territorial disputes, like Vietnam, will be largely ignored. This is necessary to explore China’s creation of artificial islands vis-à-vis the PCA. Therefore, this paper will ignore territorial dynamics that the PCA chose not to discuss. The focus on artificial islands means that territorial disputes that do not involve artificial creation will also not be included in this paper. This is a prerequisite to exploring the environmental history of this man-made territory. The period covered is 2013-2016, as that is the period that covers both the PCA case and the Great Wall of Sand.

The research question that this paper will seek to answer is: How did the South China Sea Arbitration Case collide with the Great Wall of Sand? Answering this question will require two chapters. Chapter 1 will answer two sub-questions: What are artificial islands according to international law? What is the Nine-Dash Line, and how do artificial islands bolster it? Chapter 2 will answer two further linked sub-questions: What did the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling determine on the link between artificial islands and territorial jurisdiction? What effect did this have on China’s creation of artificial islands in the South China Sea?

Artificial Islands in International Law and in the Nine-Dash Line

To elucidate the status of artificial islands in international law, we must go back to the United Nations Conference in Montego Bay on 10 December 1982, when UNCLOS was created.²³⁰ Article 60 lays out the framework concerning artificial islands in international law by listing eight points. Points 1, 2, 3 and 8 are germane. Point 1 states “In the exclusive economic zone, the coastal State shall have the exclusive right to construct and to authorize and regulate the construction, operation and use of: (a) artificial islands.” Point 2 gives exclusive jurisdiction to the coastal state over artificial islands. Points 3 and 8, however, put constraints on the scope of artificial islands. Point 3 requires states to give due

notice to “be given of the construction of such artificial islands, installations and structures, and permanent means for giving warning of their presence must be maintained.” And last but not least, Point 8: “Artificial islands, installations and structures do not possess the status of islands. They have no territorial sea of their own, and their presence does not affect the delimitation of the territorial sea, the exclusive economic zone or the continental shelf.”²³¹ In other words, while it is legal to construct artificial islands within one’s own economic exclusivity zone (which is defined as “an area beyond and adjacent to the territorial sea, subject to the specific legal regime established” in UNCLOS), it in no way can be legally misconstrued to extend a country’s territorial sea or economic exclusivity zone (EEZ)²³².

A key problem with the NDL was its vagueness. China lacked official coordinates for it. Additionally, as Orange Wang in the South China Morning Post noted, “Beijing has confirmed it does not claim everything within the line as its territorial waters,” yet Chinese scholars have argued its “historic rights claims were compatible with UNCLOS, noting that there might be cultural and historical factors behind the differing perspectives of the concept between China and the West.”²³³ These historical claims also form the basis for artificially reclaiming islands and building dual-use infrastructures on them in the South China Sea.²³⁴

Among the parts of the SCS occupied by China are seven features of the Spratly Islands: Mischief Reef, Cuarteron Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, Gaven Reef [North], Johnson Reef, Hughes Reef, and Subi Reef. After the commencement of international arbitral proceedings in January 2013, China began taking drastic steps to change the physical landscape of these seven features into huge artificial islands. These artificial islands are several times bigger than the other natural islands occupied by other countries in the region. China has further fostered its control of these artificial islands by building on them installations such as airstrips, port facilities and other buildings.²³⁵ By 2017, China had in total built over 3200 acres of new land in the Spratlys. The types of infrastructure built were not limited to civilian purposes. They also included helipads, hangars, fuel and ammunition storage, and radar and sensor arrays that all helped contribute to the Chinese militarisation of the SCS

that occurred between 2013 and 2017.²³⁶

Bhatt has noted that among the things the 2016 PCA ruling reproached China for was “the environmental decline caused by China’s maritime activities and damage to the marine ecosystem of the SCS.”²³⁷ Bhatt has argued that the South China Sea is part of what has been termed the “Global Commons,” which she believes includes oceans. “The idea of the ‘common heritage of mankind’ or ‘Global Commons’ is the founding principle for several international laws. It essentially refers to the areas and domains that lie beyond boundaries or jurisdictions. Oceans form one such common heritage besides the outer space, seabed and cultural properties present all over the world.”²³⁸

China’s unilateral actions in the SCS, including artificial reclamation of islands, “have had an adverse impact on the fragile marine ecosystem of the region that falls under its NDL claim.”²³⁹ The Spratly Islands, for example, have extensive coral reefs that spread over 30 square miles. These have been considerably damaged by China “turning natural, sterile reefs into permanent military outposts that include massive runways, by artificially inserting sand.”²⁴⁰ This goes against the Global Commons principle, which could be argued to be central to international law. Nonetheless, Bhatt has added that the term “Global Commons” has never appeared in any official Chinese state discourse in this context.²⁴¹ This disregard of the idea of a Global Commons was reflected in an argument put forward by the Chinese Society of International Law: “[t]he question whether or not a low-tide elevation can be appropriated as territory is in itself an issue of territorial sovereignty.”²⁴² If China applied this logic to artificial islands, it could argue that whatever way it chooses to change its environment is not a question of the Global Commons but a question of *Chinese territorial sovereignty*.

The PCA South China Sea Arbitration Case in Theory and Practice

The international legal basis for the South China Sea Arbitration by the PCA that began on 22 January 2013 and concluded on 12 July 2016 was Annex VII of UNCLOS.²⁴³ Among the things sought

by the Philippines from the tribunal was a declaration that China had violated UNCLOS by “inflicting severe harm on the marine environment by constructing artificial islands and engaging in extensive land reclamation at seven reefs in the Spratly Islands.” The Philippines furthermore claimed that China’s “large-scale construction of artificial islands and land reclamation” had further “aggravated and extended the disputes” between the Philippines and China during the arbitration.²⁴⁴

Chapter VII parts (d) and (e) and Chapter VIII of The South China Sea Arbitration of Award of 12 July 2016 (hereafter referred to as Award) dealt with the artificial island question in the Spratlys.²⁴⁵ The first thing that the Tribunal discussed in the sections on artificial islands was China’s “obligation to protect and preserve the marine environment.”²⁴⁶ Despite this, the Tribunal, based on expert reports, expressed that it had “no doubt that China’s artificial building activities on the seven reefs in the Spratly Islands have caused devastating and long-lasting damage to the marine environment.”²⁴⁷ Furthermore, due to the magnitude and impact of the Chinese island-building activities, the Tribunal found China was required to prepare an environmental impact assessment and obligated to communicate its results. Due to China’s failure to communicate an environmental impact assessment, the Tribunal found that China had not fulfilled its duties under Article 206 of UNCLOS.²⁴⁸

Part (e) concerned itself with China’s occupation and island-building on Mischief Reef. The Philippines alleged that this violated “the provisions of the Convention concerning artificial islands, installations and structures.”²⁴⁹ China had started construction there in January 1995. However, until 2013, this was relatively limited. By November 2015, according to an estimate by the Philippines, this had escalated to the creation of 5,580,000 square metres of new land on Mischief Reef. The Chinese side claimed this was completely lawful. Once again, the Tribunal ruled in the Philippines’ favour and found China’s actions violated UNCLOS. Furthermore, the low-tide nature of Mischief Reef meant it could not be legally appropriated.²⁵⁰ Chapter VIII furthermore found that China had aggravated the dispute through building a large artificial island on Mischief Reef, in part because it inflicted permanent irreparable damage to the coral reef habitat of that marine

environment. In addition, other large-scale island-building projects at other reefs in the Spratlys aggravated the dispute.²⁵¹

The Philippines itself, at one point during the arbitration, referred to the concept of Global Commons in its interpretation of Article 121(3) of UNCLOS. Based on this, the Philippines argued “that it would be unjustifiable and inequitable to allow tiny and insignificant features, which just happen to protrude above water at high tide, to generate huge maritime entitlements to the prejudice of other proximate coastal states with lengthy coastlines and significant populations, or to the prejudice of the global commons beyond national jurisdiction.”²⁵² It is worth noting that this is the only time the Global Commons was mentioned explicitly throughout the Award primary source document. Nonetheless, the Award cites Part XII Article 197 of UNCLOS “which requires states to cooperate on a global or regional basis, “directly or through competent international organizations” and that the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea emphasised this duty as “a fundamental principle in the prevention of pollution of the marine environment under Part XII of the Convention and general international law.”²⁵³

Despite the PCA ruling that China’s building of artificial islands in the SCS violated international law and that it was bound to abide by it, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs rejected the 479-page ruling out of hand by stating “that the ruling is null and void and has no binding force.”²⁵⁴ China’s building of artificial islands greatly accelerated after the international arbitration proceedings began. Ironically, the PCA proceedings themselves may have been an instigating factor for artificial island building. This harks to a tradition in IR that has previously been dismissed as of little value in understanding environmental politics: realism.

Realism postulates that the international political system is anarchic. This means the absence of a sovereign world government that binds nation-states to its will. Consequently, sovereign nation-states are the primary actors in international relations. Furthermore, in this framework, states are primarily motivated by the pursuit of relative power, especially military and economic power. This pursuit of relative power makes lasting cooperation “extremely unlikely,

except when cooperation is driven and maintained by one single, powerful state, or hegemony, for as long as it is willing and able to do so.”²⁵⁵ The majority of countries had ratified UNCLOS by 2013. One glaring country missing from this list, however, is the most powerful country at the time, the United States.²⁵⁶ And with China’s rising power, even vigorous American participation in UNCLOS at the time may not have been enough. As an article in *Foreign Affairs* described back in 2011: “China’s growing strength, most realists argue, will lead it to pursue its interests more assertively,” adding that this is evidenced by “China’s recent harder line on its maritime claims in the East China and South China Seas.”²⁵⁷ China’s tacit idea that might makes right is epitomised in a quote from a book by the late Lee Kuan Yew, the former prime minister of Singapore: “China tells us that countries big or small are equal, that it is not a hegemon,” Mr Lee writes. “But when we do something they do not like, they say you have made 1.3 billion people unhappy. So please know your place.” In other words, if the Global Commons norm clashes with Chinese national interests in the SCS, due to China being stronger than its neighbours, it will build and reinforce artificial islands there to consolidate its territorial claims.

Conclusion

The clash between China’s building of artificial islands in the SCS and the 2016 PCA arbitration ruling reflects one wider inherent tension within global environmental governance: the tension between national interests and global interests. China’s building of artificial islands on territory that is, according to international law itself, part of the Global Commons or the sovereign state of the Philippines, substantially contributed to China’s consolidation of the South China Sea in 2013- 2016. However, this also required China to break what was accepted by countries like the Philippines as binding agreements that China itself had signed onto (such as UNCLOS). As a consequence, this has hurt China’s credibility when it comes to ratifying prospective international treaties and thus restrains the potential of future global environmental governance that requires Chinese cooperation. Furthermore, due to China’s disregard of the PCA’s multiple warnings, the marine environment in parts of the SCS was heavily damaged in 2013-2016. This was seen, for example, with the

large-scale permanent damage of coral reefs at Mischief Reef.

This paper has made contributions to the historiography of the South China Sea Arbitration by applying realist theory and the Global Commons concept. It has also shown through its analysis of the Award primary source that some attempts at international environmental arbitration have historically been counterproductive. The synthesis of the literature used has shown the inherent tensions between various national and global interests competing in global environmental politics. When there is a strong power imbalance in international relations and the greater power jettisons the views of the international community and smaller states in favour of its national interests, and there is no countervailing force able to make it comply, then realism trumps concepts like the Global Commons. The South China Sea Arbitration proceedings intended to protect the marine environment of the South China Sea. Despite this, parts of the marine environment declined in the mid-2010s due in part to blatant illegal Chinese construction of artificial islands in the face of international law.

Liberal IR theory works only if states agree that cooperation through intergovernmental organisations is a win-win. One thing that might have deterred China from ignoring international law and made it more willing to abide by the PCA’s court ruling would have been if the United States, the other preeminent superpower at the time, had been a party to UNCLOS. Although American scholars have been pioneers in the field of international law and have encouraged the creation and empowerment of international institutions as places to resolve interstate disputes, the United States itself has been historically reluctant to ratify a lot of these international treaties. While the United States implicitly accepts UNCLOS in practice, its refusal to bind itself to the treaty deeply undermines the legitimacy of the treaty. Worse, it makes the United States appear hypocritical in the eyes of rising powers like China. If the superpower is unwilling to submit itself to international scrutiny, then why should a rising power like China be expected or willing to do so? Furthermore, international law requires teeth to succeed in practice. If the great powers do not abide by it, then the whole structure is undermined. Conversely, there was a consensus

among the great powers (most importantly the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, which were China, France, Russia, the UK and the US) in 1990-1991 that Saddam Hussein's Iraq invasion of Kuwait was illegal. Consequently, the United Nations authorities deployed a military force to expel Iraq from Kuwait to restore the territorial sovereignty of the latter. Unfortunately, if a preeminent power like the United States is unwilling to bind itself to international law, then lofty principles like the Global Commons are virtually meaningless in

what they can achieve, especially if there is a power imbalance and conflicting interests. However, to see if the lack of American ratification has inhibited progress on disputes not involving China, further research could be done on PCA cases in other regions, such as those involving exclusively European countries. As European countries pride themselves on being supporters of the liberal international order, they may take more notice of what institutions like the PCA and UNCLOS require of them.



WILLIAM PIRAS

THE BALKANS AMIDST A POST-UNIPOLAR WORLD

AN INTERVIEW WITH PASCHALIS PECHLIVANIS

This interview, conducted by Midas van de Weetering in September 2025, features insights from Dr. Paschalis Pechlivanis, a Cold War researcher and Assistant Professor at Utrecht University. Dr. Pechlivanis specializes in Cold War American foreign policy in the Balkans, with particular emphasis on Greece and Romania. The views expressed are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the interviewer, Utrecht University, or GA!.

You are currently working on a project that looks at Balkan history as a Cold War microcosm. What do you mean by a Cold War microcosm?

During the Cold War, the Balkans was a very peculiar region because within its borders, it included all the representative ingredients of the greater Cold War conflict. Greece and Turkey were NATO members; Bulgaria and Romania were Warsaw Pact members; Yugoslavia represented the Non-Aligned Movement; and Albania was a peculiar case that moved toward isolationism as the Cold War progressed. This unique geopolitical mix makes the region an excellent case to study the Cold War itself. My main point is that looking at how the Cold War played out in the Balkans from 1945 to 1989 helps us understand the global Cold War more clearly.

Today, many people argue that we are moving toward a more multipolar world order as the American dominance in the 1990s has declined. Some have suggested that the Balkans mirror these dynamics, notably with EU, Chinese, and Russian influences. What is your take on the debate about multipolarity, and how do you see it play out in the Balkans?

Regarding multipolarity, I agree with that characterization. The unipolar moment did not last long, perhaps only the 1990s, when the United States

was not simply a superpower, but a hyperpower. With the rise of “the rest,” especially China, and the increasingly assertive Russia under Putin, we have moved toward a multipolar world.

As for the Balkans, the region has traditionally been a crossroads for great-power competition, going back to the age of empires. The Ottoman Empire, Russian Empire, and Habsburg Empire all had interests there and competed over the region. Being the object of great-power rivalry is nothing new for the Balkans.

Is it something inherent in the geography of the Balkans that they lie at the crossroads of multiple powers?

The geographical aspect definitely plays a role. Balkan countries often describe themselves as being at the crossroads of civilizations, cultures, and geopolitical forces. Sometimes that is accurate, sometimes a bit exaggerated, but within the broader Mediterranean and Eastern Mediterranean system, the Balkans do hold strategic importance for larger powers.

What would you say are the current great-power interests in the region? Russia, the EU, or China?

The new addition to the Balkan geopolitical mix is China. Russian and Western European influence has existed in the region since at least the nineteenth century. What is new is China emerging as an influential power in the last 15-20 years.

In the 1990s, Western integration was essentially the only game in town. After the fall of the communist regimes, Balkan elites, especially in former communist countries, actively pursued EU and NATO membership. But the process was not uniform. Some states progressed quickly; others lagged behind. This created space for skepticism

regarding the European project, especially in Serbia, allowing China to emerge as a worthwhile partner.

Traditionally, Russia has had close ties with Serbia and Bulgaria, partly due to cultural and religious affinities. With China, the connection is more pragmatic: investments, infrastructure projects, and trade, crucially *without* the EU's requirement of reforms related to rule of law, governance, and corruption.

In the last twenty years, the European door has somewhat closed itself to countries like Serbia, leaving space for China and Russia. What exactly do Russia and China offer as alternatives?

From the European perspective, the main issue is the EU's carrot-and-stick approach: financial aid in exchange for reforms related to rule of law, governance, and corruption. This was not always welcomed in places like Serbia and Bosnia.

Russia and China, in contrast, are willing to work with governments without demanding such reforms. Russia offers cultural and religious affinities, especially in Serbia. China offers major investment opportunities: infrastructure, roads, airports, ports, again without conditionality. Whether these investments actually benefit the host countries is a subject of debate, but the lack of political conditionality makes Russia and China appealing alternatives.

What role does the agency of local ruling elites play? In some countries like Poland, elites embraced integration. In the Balkans, some enacted reforms, others refused. Was this a choice by the ruling elites, or did the EU overstep?

It's a mix. Croatia and Slovenia successfully joined the EU, even though reforms were not perfect. Serbia's main issue is Kosovo. Kosovo is the cornerstone of Serbian foreign policy, and many in Serbia fear that joining the EU would mean sacrificing Kosovo. That makes EU membership politically difficult. This, combined with the EU's own crises, the financial crisis, structural weaknesses, and Brexit, reduced the appeal of the European project. The legacies of the

Yugoslav Wars also hinder closer engagement with the EU.

What about Bosnia? It is also scarred by war, corruption, ethnic divisions, and sees increasing Turkish influence.

Bosnia has no unified voice. The Serbian entity within Bosnia aligns more with Serbia's stance. Governance structures are fragile, they are the result of the war ending Dayton Agreement, a compromise largely imposed rather than emerging from goodwill. A substantial portion of Bosnian Serbs would prefer union with Serbia rather than a unified Bosnia. This makes reforms very difficult. And the EU's normative influence, so powerful in the early 2000s, has significantly declined.

Your previous comments bring me to the idea of enlargement fatigue. The EU expanded rapidly in the early 2000s and then stalled: it is no longer seen as a grand peace project. Do you think the EU can still be appealing to the Balkans?

The EU is going through an identity crisis, and we see the rise of conservatism in several member states. Debates over limiting migration make it politically unpopular to include Balkan states whose populations might migrate westward.

Part of the problem is not that the Balkan states don't want to join, but that the EU is reluctant to expand. Brexit made the European project appear less stable, less flawless. Until confidence in the EU recovers, I don't expect a warm approach to expansion, unless Balkan governments implement all necessary reforms and present a strong case.

Drawing parallel with the Balkans as a Cold War microcosm, to what extent is the region a mirror of the multipolar world order?

I think today's situation is different. The Cold War had a clear bipolar structure. Today's multipolarity is broader and more vague, more like classic great-power competition. Without the strict bipolar constraints, smaller countries have more room to

maneuver, but they are also less essential to great powers. I wouldn't call the Balkans a microcosm of multipolarity as many regions could fit that description. But the region remains of interest to Russia and China, partly because the U.S. no longer prioritizes it. The U.S. was very active in the 1990s during the Yugoslav Wars, but after shifting focus to the Middle East and the 'War on Terror', the Balkans fell lower on the agenda.

If the U.S. had remained heavily engaged after the Yugoslav Wars, would the dynamics be different?

It's hypothetical, but perhaps U.S. engagement could have prolonged the appeal of the Western option. Albania, for example, still strongly desires integration with NATO and the EU. Had the U.S. been more active, the pro-Western narrative might have remained stronger.

Finally, is there a point you feel is often overlooked in discussions of this topic that you would like to highlight?

Our discussion may sound critical of the EU, but EU membership has had significant positive effects for states that joined. For Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, membership changed regional relations. The region was once plagued by nationalism

and inter-state competition; being part of the EU changed the mindset. Relations between Greece and Bulgaria, once adversarial, now revolve around tourism, trade, and open borders. This shows the transformative effect of EU membership.

If Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania were to join, many issues relating to borders and minorities would become less meaningful borders would be just lines on a map. But this requires time and generational change. Given the EU's current identity crisis and rising Euroskepticism, it will be difficult to convince skeptics that the European option is the most valuable one.

If Europe moves through its existential crisis, and breaks with the current negative narrative, do you think Europe could still be a viable option to move beyond the historic grievances within the Balkans, grievances that have been festering there for more than a century?

I think so too. If Europe manages to project an optimistic and hopeful vision, a positive image, if it can reinstate the character, it had especially in the 1990s and early 2000s, then I think the natural way for the Balkans is to join this family. After all, they are European countries, and they can contribute to and benefit from being part of that family. But it's a two-way street. It needs effort from both sides.



MIDAS VAN DE WEETERING -
Publication Director,
Geschiedenis Actueel
Think-Tank

THE SPIRIT OF BANDUNG REIMAGINED: INDONESIA'S MIDDLE POWER ROLE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA TODAY

“Freedom and peace are interdependent. The right of self-determination must be enjoyed by all peoples, and freedom and independence must be granted, with the least possible delay, to those who are still dependent peoples. Indeed, all nations should have the right freely to choose their own political and economic systems and their own way of life, in conformity with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations.”²⁵⁸

This passage from the *Final Communiqué* of the 1955 Bandung Conference captures the foundations of Indonesia's international identity. That year, Indonesia brought together twenty-nine Asian and African countries that were determined to break free from colonial structures and to speak with a collective voice in world affairs. The Spirit of Bandung is built on solidarity, anti-colonialism and South-South cooperation, which later guided the Non-Aligned Movement and became a touchstone for states seeking strategic autonomy.²⁵⁹

Jakarta developed a diplomatic style centred on autonomy, coalition building and careful balancing. Since the Cold War, Indonesia has relied on these principles to navigate its position between major powers.²⁶⁰ After the end of the Cold War, Indonesia gradually took on a balancing role between China and the United States. This role developed during the unipolar moment of the 1990s, when strategic competition between the major powers had not yet fully emerged. In the last decade, Indonesia has presented itself as a bridge builder in the Indo-Pacific. It acts as a swing state between China and the United States through regional institution-building, trade and investment partnerships and the use of soft power.²⁶¹ Therefore, the spirit of Bandung continues to shape Indonesia's efforts to secure regional stability, expand its economy and maintain independence in global affairs.²⁶²

At the same time, Indonesia itself is undergoing political change. With President Prabowo Subianto now in power, the country's foreign policy is entering a new phase that interacts directly with rising geopolitical affairs and tensions. His early decisions raise questions about how Indonesia's traditional Bandung-inspired principles are being reinterpreted in a more contested Indo-Pacific environment. These shifts make it necessary to reassess Indonesia's strategic posture and to understand how internal developments relate to external pressures.²⁶³

This article takes a historical analytical approach that places Indonesia's current foreign policy within longer patterns of continuity. It examines how Indonesia's middle power identity is being reshaped in a multipolar world and how Prabowo's early presidency aligns with or diverges from these trajectories. The central question is how Indonesia is redefining its middle power role today, and to what extent Prabowo's first year reflects continuity or change in the Bandung tradition. The article addresses this through three steps: a country profile, an analysis of Indonesia's geopolitical goals and strategies, and an assessment of the shifting political winds under Prabowo.

Country Profile

Indonesia is often described as a middle power. It is not as strong as the major powers, but it is far from weak. In most global rankings, it sits in the middle, and its diplomatic behaviour reflects that position. Indonesia focuses on cooperation and building coalitions rather than confrontation. It also sees itself as a middle power, and most other countries treat it that way.²⁶⁴

The country helped launch the Bandung movement in 1955. A decade later, it became a founding member of ASEAN. This regional

organisation was created to promote peace, stability and economic cooperation across Southeast Asia. Its growth has been shaped by Indonesia's '*bebas dan aktif*' or 'free and active' foreign policy and by Jakarta's leadership in regional diplomacy and the wider Indo-Pacific. For Indonesia, resilience both at home and in the region is inseparable. Suharto, the country's second president, made this point in the early 1970s. He wanted Southeast Asia to be strong enough to manage its own future without outside interference. His vision was straightforward. A resilient region would bring prosperity at home, stability abroad and contribute to global peace.²⁶⁵

Indonesia stands out as the largest country in Southeast Asia, both in terms of population, economy, and geography. It accounts for about 41% of ASEAN's population and 40% of its GDP. Even though the ASEAN chair rotates each year, Indonesia is widely regarded as the bloc's natural leader. Yet the geopolitical environment is shifting. Rivalry between China and the United States, the rise of other middle powers, and the growing role of regional institutions all shape the landscape. In this context, Joko Widodo's administration (2014-2024) sought to revive and reinterpret the Bandung legacy as a guide for foreign policy.²⁶⁶

Indonesia's strength as a regional player rests on its geography, population, and resources. At the crossroads of the Indo-Pacific, it controls vital sea lanes such as the Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok Straits. This strategic role was reinforced in 2017 with the Indonesian Ocean Policy, which asserted full sovereignty over its maritime domain and set out a framework for managing ocean affairs. With more than 270 million people, Indonesia is the world's fourth most populous country, and its youthful workforce drives economic potential.²⁶⁷ Natural resources add another layer of power. Vast reserves of nickel and copper make Indonesia a key supplier for global industries, especially in the energy transition and battery production.²⁶⁸ The Indonesian Geological Agency has also identified rare earth elements, including monazite, xenotime, and bastnaesite, across Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Bangka Belitung. These finds give the country valuable leverage in the global race for rare earth minerals exploitation.²⁶⁹ At the same time, they place the country at the centre of geopolitical

competition and expose it to pressing environmental challenges.²⁷⁰

Indonesia faces a range of domestic challenges that can influence its regional role. The events of 2025, including large-scale demonstrations and public frustration over economic and governance issues, have placed pressure on national institutions.²⁷¹ Centre-periphery dynamics also remain sensitive. In Papua, tensions between security forces and local groups continue to affect communities.²⁷² At the other end of the archipelago, in Aceh, periodic debates over autonomy show that the legacy of past conflict still matters.²⁷³ Other regions, such as Maluku and Central Sulawesi, experience occasional unrest.²⁷⁴ These events reflect the complexity of governing a diverse archipelago. Environmental pressures, including floods, landslides and earthquakes, place further demands on the government's ability to coordinate responses across provinces.²⁷⁵ Taken together, these dynamics show how domestic challenges may influence Indonesia's governance capacity and its ability to project power abroad.

(Geo)Political Goals

Indonesia's foreign policy since the early 2000s has been dominated by three main objectives: maintaining regional stability, expanding the economy, and defending its own independence. These are not new priorities. They are reminiscent of the 1955 Spirit of Bandung, which advocated for solidarity, nonalignment, and collaboration among developing countries. Through multilateralism via the use of collective platforms, Indonesia has continued that spirit since the 1950s. This has allowed the nation to demonstrate its independence and contribute to the stability of Southeast Asia.²⁷⁶

Regional stability via diplomatic means

Indonesia has long stepped in when Southeast Asia has been shaken by trouble. Jakarta prefers mediation over confrontation, and over the years, has built a reputation for leadership. This reputation is rooted in its role as a founding member of ASEAN in 1967 and reinforced by repeated interventions in crises ranging from the

Cambodia–Vietnam war in the 1980s to Myanmar’s turmoil today. Shuttle diplomacy is often its chosen tool. It is a method of quiet, separate talks followed by careful attempts to bring opposing parties together under ASEAN’s umbrella. While it is slow and sometimes frustrating, it has often kept the region from sliding into chaos.²⁷⁷

Since 1990, Indonesia has hosted formal and informal meetings to manage tensions in the South China Sea. They opened space for ASEAN members and China to talk. Out of this process came the *2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties*. Imperfect in design, yet strong enough to keep disputes contained for much of the following decades. It is a fragile balance, but one that has held until today.²⁷⁸ Fast forward to April 2021, when Myanmar’s crisis was spiralling, and violence was spreading. Indonesia stepped forward, pressing for a special ASEAN leaders’ meeting under Brunei’s chairmanship. The summit produced a five-point consensus aimed at ending the bloodshed and starting the dialogue.²⁷⁹

Jakarta also relies on military diplomacy. Every two years, it hosts the Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo. These exercises are joined by ASEAN members, China, the United States, and other naval powers. They are not combat drills; instead, they focus on humanitarian missions and search-and-rescue practices. It signals Indonesia’s ability to convene, to lead, and to keep waters calmer than they might otherwise be. Alongside this come maritime security dialogues in the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus and the ASEAN Regional Forum.²⁸⁰

Economic Growth

Indonesia is working hard to turn its geography into an advantage by presenting itself as the pivot point of the Indo-Pacific. The country is positioning itself as a logistical hub. It does so by locking itself more firmly into global supply chains via trade deals, new infrastructure, and controlling busy maritime corridors.²⁸¹

During its ASEAN Chairmanship in 2023, Indonesia outlined three key priorities: to revive regional growth and competitiveness, accelerate the

digital economy, and promote sustainable growth that can withstand future shocks. A set of sixteen priority deliverables was identified, alongside hundreds of smaller action lines. Some stand out, such as tackling inflation and keeping financial systems stable.²⁸² Additionally, Indonesia is also keen to strengthen and expand the Chiang Mai Initiative. This is a currency swap arrangement that created a shared pool of foreign exchange reserves, which participating central banks can access when needed.²⁸³

On the practical side, Indonesia started to push for progress on payment systems via QR codes and local currency transactions to reduce reliance on the dollar. Building on its G20 work, Indonesia is also pushing transition finance for the green economy, digital finance integration across ASEAN banks, and better financial literacy to make digital services more inclusive.²⁸⁴ Trade agreements are part of the mix too; in 2023 Indonesia worked on establishing the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area and on advancing talks with China and India.²⁸⁵

President Prabowo has added his own economic agenda. Unlike past leaders who were satisfied with modest growth and programmes, he has promised something bolder: an 8 percent growth rate by his fourth year in office, alongside massive welfare projects. These include free nutritious meals for eighty million students each year and the construction of three million houses annually for low-income families.²⁸⁶ Another major initiative is the creation of *Danantara*, a state investment authority launched in 2025. It pools sovereign capital, state-owned enterprise assets, and private co-investment, giving the presidency direct control over strategic projects. The appointment of Prabowo’s close ally to lead the state-owned enterprise regulator blurred the line between oversight and execution. In practice, this arrangement extends presidential influence deep into corporate governance and shifts coordination toward command.²⁸⁷ Nevertheless, challenges remain, and growth is still below target.²⁸⁸

Another big and promising move lies in Indonesia’s new policies on rare earth elements, which can be seen as a chance to stake a claim on

the global stage. Recently, Jakarta created a state mining agency and worked on drafting new strategic frameworks. At the moment, the country is starting to exploit its recently discovered deposits of monazite, xenotime, and bastnaesite scattered across Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Bangka Belitung. Alongside nickel, bauxite, and copper, these resources are meant to strengthen Indonesia's role in the clean-energy supply chain. It gives them leverage to offer the world something beyond China's dominance.²⁸⁹ If the plan succeeds, it could mark a genuine turning point. It may be the moment when Indonesia shifts from a regional player to a global shaper of geopolitics. The ambition is clear and the stakes are enormous, yet progress remains slow, held back by technological limitations.²⁹⁰ Furthermore, these developments also introduce significant risks. The environmental consequences are particularly severe. Collateral damage from rare earth mining can poison rivers and devastate entire landscapes. If left unchecked, the destruction could be both devastating and irreversible, a heavy price to pay for ambition.²⁹¹

Strategic autonomy, the third way

Indonesia's foreign policy continued to be shaped by the spirit of Bandung in the past decade. They emphasised strategic autonomy and a refusal to align exclusively with either China or the United States. Next to multilateralism, this independent course is supported by investments in maritime security and defence modernisation. Nevertheless, Indonesia's military capacity remains modest compared to other regional powers. To strengthen its position, Jakarta has actively pursued bilateral defence cooperation agreements and strategic partnerships that provide access to military hardware and enhance cooperation in the security domain. A recent example is the 2025 upgraded defence pact with Australia, which commits both countries to consult regularly at the leader and ministerial level, facilitate "mutually beneficial security activities", and consider joint measures if either country's security is threatened. Similar agreements have been concluded with the UK, Canada, France, India, Türkiye and South Africa, underscoring Indonesia's multi-directional approach.²⁹²

ASEAN remains the anchor of Indonesia's diplomacy. Indonesia and other Southeast Asian states have sought to maintain U.S. strategic commitment to the region while enmeshing China in norms of peaceful dispute resolution through ASEAN mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). This preserves ASEAN's centrality and ensures its relevance in managing the regional distribution of power.²⁹³ At the same time, Indonesia itself has also pursued a careful balancing act between China and the United States. Cooperation with China has deepened through the Belt and Road Initiative, which offers opportunities for infrastructure investment but also risks dependency. However, one can frame this engagement as South-South solidarity rather than subordination.²⁹⁴ On the other side sits the United States, and they see Indonesia as an important partner in their Indo-Pacific Strategy. At the same time, Jakarta draws on the Bandung principle of autonomy to avoid formal alignment.²⁹⁵ Prabowo's visits to both Beijing and Washington and his public insistence that Indonesia is "keen to befriend all countries" reinforce this refusal to be reduced to a pawn in great-power rivalry.²⁹⁶

Indonesia's approach is best described as partial multi-alignment. It engages economically with China, enhances security partnerships with the United States and other regional powers, and upholds ASEAN centrality, all without becoming dependent on a single power. Through dual-track engagement with Chinese infrastructure investment and Western partnerships, Indonesia's strategy has found success in economic diplomacy, particularly in attracting capital and building connectivity. However, its application in the maritime domain remains underdeveloped, leaving a gap between ambition and implementation.²⁹⁷

Finally, Indonesia's pursuit of strategic autonomy is reinforced by a gradual military and naval buildup. The country also plans to double defence spending by 2029. Jakarta has prioritised modernisation and diversification, although defence spending remains modest at just 0.77 percent of GDP. This buildup extends beyond foreign procurement. Jakarta is investing in its domestic defence industry, producing patrol

aircraft, and pursuing greater self-reliance through technological developments and industrial reforms. Yet modernisation remains uneven. Much of the fleet is ageing, and limited budgets continue to restrict Indonesia's ability to project power.²⁹⁸

A changing geopolitical wind and Prabowo's first year

Indonesia's foreign policy has always carried a certain rhythm. For decades, leaders spoke of *bebas dan aktif*, balancing carefully between rival powers while holding onto principle. Bandung's ideals gave Indonesia a moral compass and a sense of purpose in the world. However, that compass feels less steady under Prabowo, and his first year has been marked not by principle but by transaction.²⁹⁹

Prabowo wasted no time stepping onto the global stage. His first trip abroad was to Beijing, where he signed ten billion dollars' worth of deals with Xi Jinping. More striking than the money was the joint statement on the South China Sea. By hinting at recognition of China's nine-dash line, Jakarta broke with ASEAN's usual caution.³⁰⁰ Months later, Prabowo was invited to Beijing's military parade to commemorate the end of the Second World War as a guest of honour, a gesture heavy with symbolism.³⁰¹ Additionally, Prabowo also skipped the G7 Summit in Canada to appear beside Vladimir Putin in St Petersburg at an economic forum.³⁰²

These moves made clear where Indonesia's priorities now lie. This is further supported by Indonesia's request to join BRICS while also applying for Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) membership. This new style can be described as selective alignment. Scholar Virdika Rizky Utama argues this reflects participation without a clear hierarchy of goals, a search for position rather than purpose. Partnerships are now issue-specific: France for defence procurement, China for infrastructure, and the United States for commercial deals. The signal was unmistakable; Indonesia is repositioning itself in a multipolar world.³⁰³

Scholars and analysts, including Virdika Rizky Utama, note that Indonesia appears to be moving away from its role as a mediating middle power. ASEAN, once Indonesia's anchor, has slipped into the background.³⁰⁴ Jakarta attends meetings, but it leads less often than it once did. In crises like Myanmar's civil war or South China Sea tensions, Indonesia provides presence but not a clear initiative.³⁰⁵ Neighbours have taken note, and many now hedge rather than wait for Jakarta to set the tone. The region's quiet expectation that Indonesia would act as a middle power is beginning to fade.

There are benefits to this transactional style because it offers flexibility, visibility and room to manoeuvre. However, it also carries costs. When diplomacy turns into bargaining, trust can weaken, and partners may begin to see Indonesia as available but not always dependable.³⁰⁶ The decision not to mark the seventieth anniversary of the Bandung Conference with a major event added to the sense that Jakarta has struggled to articulate its voice.³⁰⁷ Visibility without vision can only go so far. Prabowo's first year has been bold, restless and highly visible. Yet the question remains about what Jakarta's goals truly are. Virdika Rizky Utama remarks that Prabowo makes deals and that his appearances can raise a country's profile, but without a clearer sense of direction they risk leaving only impressions.³⁰⁸

All of this unfolds against a wider backdrop. The global liberal world order is fragmenting, and economic power is increasingly securitised. Countries have been raising trade barriers on critical minerals, enacting investment screening in sensitive sectors, and implementing protectionist policies. The changes in the United States, the European Union, and China are reshaping the playing field. For ASEAN and for Indonesia, this means tougher conditions for investment and more pressure to adapt. The ASEAN Economic Community will need to take more initiative, reform its institutions and find ways to shield smaller states from the spillover of great-power rivalry.³⁰⁹ Yet it remains uncertain how, and to what extent, Indonesia as ASEAN's *primus inter pares* will be able to deliver on these expectations.

A middle power in a changing world

Indonesia's foreign policy still carries the spirit of Bandung. The old idea of independence, South-South solidarity and multilateralism has not disappeared. Yet the liberal world order is weakening, great powers are competing, and smaller states are being pulled in different directions. Indonesia sits in the middle of this shifting landscape. Its geography is a strength, its economy a tool, and its networks a source of influence.

Prabowo's leadership adds a new tone. Indonesia wants to be more visible on the global stage while also showing that it can protect its own interests. The years ahead will bring difficult choices. The rivalry between the United States and China will continue to test Jakarta's ability to maintain its independence. ASEAN once offered Indonesia a strong platform, but its cohesion now feels fragile, and rebuilding trust will require sustained effort. At home, ambitious plans for growth and rare earth mining sound promising, yet technological gaps and environmental risks could slow progress. The deeper challenge is credibility.

If Indonesia continues to pursue deals without a clear strategic vision, partners may begin to see it as unpredictable. To remain influential, it needs more than visibility and requires a defined purpose to guide its actions.

In the end, Indonesia's diplomacy is about walking a fine line. The Bandung spirit still resonates, but it now mixes with a sharper and more strategic edge. This blend of pragmatism and ambition will shape Indonesia's place in the world in the years to come. For Dutch and European policymakers it is essential to recognise this shift because Indonesia's choices might increasingly be shaped by selective alignment and a strong desire for autonomy. Effective cooperation will therefore depend on steady bilateral engagement and a clear understanding of shared interests. This transition also opens avenues for further research, including how middle powers adapt their strategies in a multipolar order and how domestic political change shapes their ability to balance competing pressures. Understanding how Indonesia navigates this new phase will be essential for anyone seeking to work with or within Southeast Asia's evolving regional order.



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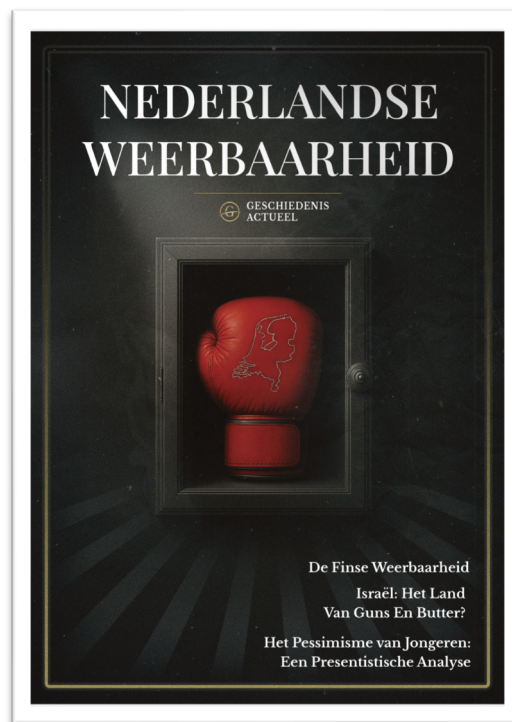
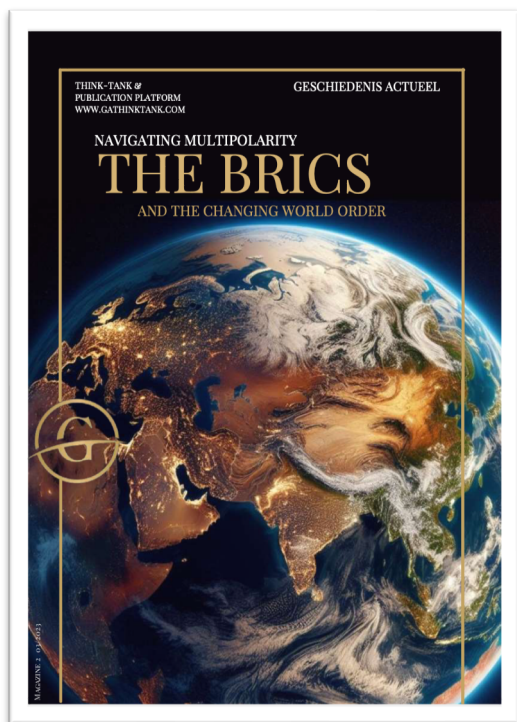
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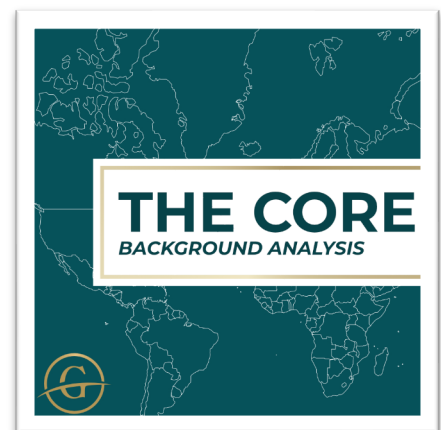
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