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STRATEGIC COMPETITION IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

GUEST EDITOR: FRANK HAGEMANN

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Welcoming Address

Welcome to the Latest Issue of *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*!

This edition marks a new way forward for the *Connections* journal. The Partnership for Peace Consortium (PfPC) Secretariat and the College of International Security Studies (CISS)—both part of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies—will now be collaborating to curate four issues of *Connections* per year, bringing a broader range of perspectives and expertise to our global readership.

This issue, titled “Strategic Competition in a Globalized World,” holds particular significance as it is the first of its kind guest-edited by the CISS leadership. This edition, led by Col. Dr. Frank Hagemann, Deputy Dean of Research at CISS, presents twelve articles that explore various aspects of strategic competition and its impact on international security. The contributions come from a diverse group of authors, including faculty, partner institutions, and our worldwide alumni network members. This diversity reflects the broad academic community the Marshall Center brings together, serving as a platform for meaningful dialogue and knowledge exchange.

Central to the Marshall Center’s mission is our commitment to educate, engage, and empower international security professionals by advancing intellectual interoperability. At its core, this concept is about enabling nations and organizations to work together more effectively through shared understanding, mutual trust, and informed discussions. Academic thought and collaborative research—such as the *Connections* journal—play a key role in this process, helping to bridge gaps across cultures and regions. This issue reflects that goal, bringing together academic perspectives from partner countries such as Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, as well as Burkina Faso, Ghana, and India. These contributions offer valuable views about the challenges and opportunities different regions face in an increasingly competitive and interconnected world.

This edition would not have been possible without the hard work and dedication of several key individuals. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Laura Thurston Goodroe, Chief of Academic Publications, for her exceptional management of the editorial process. I also wish to recognize Major Martin

Schuster, PfPC Program Manager, for his support in coordinating this effort. Their contributions were essential in bringing this issue to our readers.

As you read through the articles in this edition, I hope the analyses and perspectives help provide a deeper understanding of the strategic challenges we face today and encourage you to ponder how we can collectively find sustainable solutions for the future.

Thank you for your continued engagement with *Connections* and for being part of the broader Marshall Center community.

Let's stay *connected*!

Sincerely,

Barre R. Seguin

Director, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies



Introduction

The Myth of Bipolarity: How to Understand Strategic Competition in a Globalized World

Frank Hagemann

George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies,

<http://www.marshallcenter.org>

Abstract: The aim of this *Connections* issue is to explore the various aspects and implications of strategic competition in a globalized world. International politics will not be shaped solely by the two superpowers, the United States and China, struggling for dominance in different world regions. Several other states and groups of states will also influence the outcome of this competition. Considering a more complex constellation of actors opens up new perspectives on the political and economic challenges ahead and facilitates the exploration of approaches to bridge gaps with non-aligned countries.

The issue begins by examining the most important actors in international politics and then concentrates on the different world regions relevant to strategic competition. Finally, it explores cross-cutting trends and topics that will significantly influence the global outcome of this competition. As a result, it offers key takeaways: The Political West would be wise to recognize the perceptions and needs of nonaligned countries in the context of strategic competition. In this regard, China and Russia are perceived as adversaries of the West. Their narratives resonate strongly in many countries in the Global South. The Political West must regain the initiative and actively promote its competitive advantage. India holds critical importance in this context. Supporting the development of an additional pole in South Asia and fostering the rules-based liberal world order could help contain bilateral conflicts and reduce tensions at both global and regional levels.

Keywords: strategic competition, great powers, rivalry, international system, world order, Cold war, globalization, great power competition.

Introduction

The world is entering a new age of strategic competition between major powers. Anti-Western and nondemocratic actors challenge the rules-based liberal world order that emerged after 1990. While it is clear that the international system is undergoing a fundamental transformation, the ultimate direction of this change remains uncertain. Many observers, particularly in North America, China, and Europe, perceive this emerging order primarily as a bipolar rivalry between China and the United States.¹ Sino-American antagonism is undoubtedly a key driver of the ongoing structural changes. However, this view is contested in Russia and other parts of the world. Many observers from countries in the Global South, as well as some from the Political West,² reject the assessment that the international system is moving towards bipolarity. They instead argue that a multipolar order is emerging.³ The issue at hand goes beyond a mere debate over terminology. In fact, the critical question is whether the two superpowers will ultimately be decisive in determining the outcome of this strategic competition or whether other states and groups of states will also play a significant role in shaping its course.

Against this background, this issue of *Connections* adopts a broad view of the evolving international system. Three sections will provide:

1. an analysis of five key players – the United States, China, Russia, India, and the European Union (EU)
2. an exploration of selected regions that play a significant role in this context
3. an examination of overarching topics likely to shape the future evolution of strategic competition.

As a result, this issue not only focuses on the major powers and their actions in key areas of competition but also explores the internal dynamics of various regions, integrating the perspectives and interests of regional actors. Finally, it addresses cross-cutting trends and topics that will significantly influence the outcome of strategic competition on a global scale.

¹ Stephanie Christine Winkler, “Strategic Competition and US-China Relations: A Conceptual Analysis,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 2023): 333–356, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poad008>.

² Political West and Political East as well as Global North and Global South are terms to describe a grouping of countries with regard to political and socio-economic aspects. The term Political West is not limited to culturally like-minded “occidental” nations but refers to politically aligned countries including the member states of NATO and EU, Israel, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.

³ A themed journey through parts of this debate is provided for example in “Is There Really a Cold War 2.0? Inside the Debate on How to Think about the U.S.-China Rivalry,” *Flash Points, Foreign Policy*, June 11, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/11/new-cold-war-2-us-china-russia-geopolitics/>.

Before examining some of the leading players, it is important to clarify the evolving structures and context of *strategic competition*. Although strategic competition has become a defining feature of the changing global landscape, the term and its underlying concepts remain complex and contested in academic and policy debates. Unlike great power competition, strategic competition involves more than just peer competitors. It also includes strategically important regional powers and transnational actors. This form of competition blurs the line between peace and war, unfolding across a spectrum that ranges from cooperation to competition and, at times, to conflicts of varying intensities. It employs national power, including diplomatic, informational, military, and economic tools. Additionally, transnational threats and challenges—such as terrorism, organized crime, and the weaponization of migration—may be exploited in this contest. When engaging in the gray zone of competition, states often respond across multiple domains, such as countering military actions with economic sanctions.⁴

The focus in this regard is typically on what has historically been defined as great powers,⁵ whose influence is considerably superior to that of medium-sized regional powers. The question of how many great powers dominate the international system is crucial, as the answer appears to significantly influence the assessment of other states' room for maneuver.⁶ In a fully developed bipolar order, for example, most states would have little choice but to align with one of the two superpowers. While this great-power-centered approach is meaningful, it overlooks the perceptions and actions of other states and groups of states. Though not major powers themselves, these states remain important because their allegiance may be a key prize in the competition. As such, they could even be said to hold the balance of power, as Parag Khanna has argued.⁷

Irrespective of the numerical distribution of forces between great and medium-sized powers, regional players may possess considerable room for maneuver in distinct world regions crucial to the outcome of strategic competition. Including these actors and their ability to navigate within the international system could provide a deeper understanding of its evolution and the extent to which

⁴ Michael J. Mazarr, Bryan Frederick, and Yvonne K. Crane, "Understanding a New Era of Strategic Competition," Research Report RR-A290-4 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, November 2022), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR-A290-4>; Christopher Paul et al., "The Role of Information in U.S. Concepts for Strategic Competition," Research Report RR-A1256-1 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2022), 8-12, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR-A1256-1>.

⁵ The term great power refers to a state that cannot be ignored on the world stage and without whose cooperation no global problem can be solved.

⁶ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Thomas F. Lynch III, "Major Findings on Contemporary Great Power Competition," in *Strategic Assessment 2020: Into a New Era of Great Power Competition*, ed. Thomas F. Lynch III (Washington, D.C.: NDU Press, November 2020), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2404283/major-findings-on-contemporary-great-power-competition/>.

⁷ Parag Khanna, *The Second World: How Emerging Powers Are Redefining Global Competition in the Twenty-first Century* (New York, NY: Random House, 2009).

great powers can dominate it. This is one of the primary objectives of this *Connections* issue.

The Dangerous Narrative of a New Cold War

Notable Western observers are discussing the possibility of a new Cold War that would once again divide the world into East and West. Remarkably, this perspective is shared not only by many political analysts⁸ but also by economic historians such as Niall Ferguson,⁹ who believe the world is reverting to a bipolar system in which nonaligned states will essentially play a role similar to the one they held until 1989. Proponents of this view point to the parallels between today's global situation and that during the Cold War – in both cases, democratic states confront authoritarian regimes. However, this distinction between states based on their political system does not provide much insight into the structure of the international system, either then or now. During the Cold War, for example, India was a democracy but did not align with the Western camp.¹⁰

After World War II, the United States could not intervene in world affairs without considering the position of the Soviet Union and vice versa. The bipolar structure of the international system constrained the scope for action of all other states. They were within the sphere of influence of the United States or the Soviet Union.¹¹ Even the so-called nonaligned countries tended to align closely with either the Western or Eastern bloc. Regional powers in conflict, such as Pakistan and India, often sought the support of the superpowers. This dynamic is particularly evident in the case of India, which, despite its leadership role in the “non-aligned movement,” developed close relations with the Soviet Union, particularly in the defense sector.¹² Consequently, during that period, it was nearly impossible to remain strategically unaligned; the bipolar world order left little room for escaping the overarching conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union.

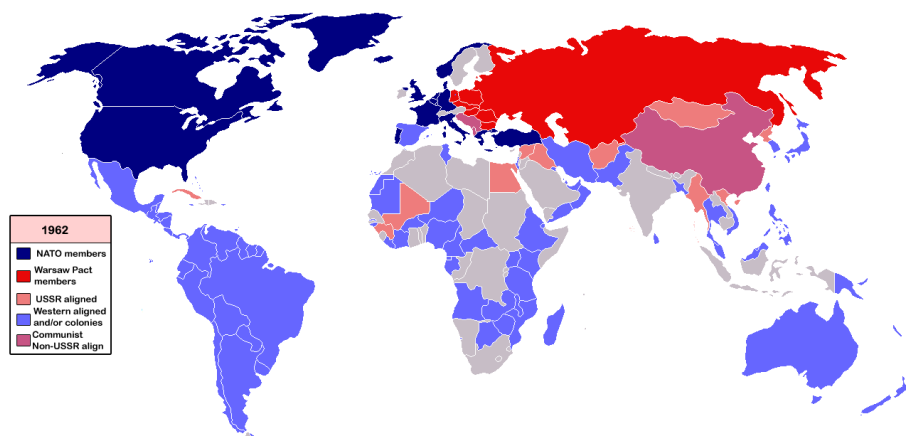
⁸ Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “The Myth of Multipolarity: American Power’s Staying Power,” *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 3 (2023), www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/china-multipolarity-myth; Elbridge Colby, “The Return of Strategic Competition: How to Execute and Sustain the National Security Strategy,” in “The Future of Conservative Internationalism,” collection of essays delivered in Beaver Creek, Colorado, in July 2019, Reagan Institute Strategy Group, accessed April 18, 2024, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/reagan-institute/publications/the-return-of-strategic-competition-how-to-execute-and-sustain-the-national-security-strategy/>.

⁹ Niall Ferguson, “America, China, Russia, and the Avalanche of History,” *Bloomberg*, May 20, 2022, www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-05-20/niall-ferguson-america-china-russia-and-the-avalanche-of-history.

¹⁰ Amit Ranjan, “India’s Foreign Policy: Shift, Adjustment and Continuity,” *The Round Table* 111, no. 3 (2022): 381-384, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2022.2082737>.

¹¹ See, for example, John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), 20-25.

¹² Vojtech Mastny, “The Soviet Union’s Partnership with India,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 12, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 50-90, https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00006.



Map 1. Cold War World Map, 1962.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cold_War_WorldMap_1962.png

In contrast to the Cold War, states today do not necessarily align themselves with one of two leading global nation-state powers. While China is often perceived as the strongest challenger to the West, it lacks a large alliance system similar to that of the Soviet Union. The frequently mentioned Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), for example, does not function as a robust alliance. Although it deals with issues of international security cooperation, the SCO operates well below the level of a mutual defense commitment and lacks a military command structure.¹³ On the other hand, the United States remains the leading power in the transatlantic alliance. However, the Indo-Pacific region—the main theater of U.S.-China rivalry—lies outside NATO’s treaty area. Instead, Washington maintains bilateral security relations with several countries in Asia, such as Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand.¹⁴ Currently, many states, even in the highly contested regions of South and Southeast Asia,

¹³ Amjad Abbas Khan, “Security Environment in South Asia: The Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation,” in *China and South Asia: Changing Regional Dynamics, Development and Power Play*, ed. Rajiv Ranjan and Guo Changgang (London: Routledge India, 2021), 97-107.

¹⁴ Andrew M. Campbell, “Contending with a Rising China: A Comparative Study of Middle-Power Strategies in the Indo-Pacific,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 1 (2023): 49-74. https://media.defense.gov/2023/feb/02/2003154179/-1/-1/1/_jipa_january-february%202023.pdf; Thomas Wilkins, “Middle Power Hedging in the Era of Security/Economic Disconnect: Australia, Japan, and the ‘Special Strategic Partnership’,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 23, no. 1 (January 2023): 93-127, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcab023>.

see no need to align themselves with either China or the United States – a trend unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.¹⁵

Another important difference concerns threat perceptions. During the Cold War, the situation was relatively straightforward for the democratic states of Western Europe: the Soviet Union was clearly the most significant military threat, and the United States also focused predominantly on countering the Soviet threat. This shared threat perception was the most important bond uniting the transatlantic community.¹⁶ Today, the picture is far more complex. For the United States, China represents the biggest threat, whereas, from a European perspective, Russia has once again become the primary threat to regional security following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹⁷ Therefore, today's geopolitical situation is very different from the constellation during the Cold War.

The same is true regarding the distribution of economic power today compared to the Cold War era. Western-oriented states dominated the global economy after World War II. Even in the 1980s, they still accounted for nearly three-quarters of global gross domestic product (GDP). However, their share has decreased to around 50 percent today (Table 1). Notably, not only the adversaries of the Political West have increased their share of global GDP – the same is true for the countries in the Global South. The economic weight of the nonaligned states is much greater today than it was during the Cold War, which contradicts the notion of a development toward a fully-fledged bipolar system.

Table 1. Share of Global GDP, at constant 2015 US Dollars.

Global GDP Share	1985	2022
Political West	73 %	51 %
Political East	9 %	20 %
Global South	18 %	29 %

Source: United Nations Statistics Division, <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/basic>.

¹⁵ Kishore Mahbubani, "Asia's Third Way: How ASEAN Survives—and Thrives—Amid Great-Power Competition," *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 2 (March/April 2023), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/southeast-asia/asias-third-way-asean-amid-great-power-competition>.

¹⁶ Common values have also been an important binding force for the majority of Western nations. However, NATO has not always been an alliance of democratic states. Dictatorial governed states, e.g. Greece from 1967 to 1974 and Türkiye after the military coups of 1960 and 1980, retained NATO membership.

¹⁷ Jana Puglierin and Pawel Zerka, "Keeping America Close, Russia Down, and China Far Away: How Europeans Navigate a Competitive World," *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, June 7, 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/keeping-america-close-russia-down-and-china-far-away-how-europeans-navigate-a-competitive-world/>.

As a result, while the bilateral rivalry between China and the United States is important, it is not the defining feature of the emerging international order. Medium-sized powers and groups of states in different regions of the world now have more leverage than they did during the Cold War.¹⁸

Misperceptions of the Evolving International Order Are Driving Bad Policies

In studying the evolving international order, the distribution of military capabilities and economic potential serve as a starting point for further analysis. Regional constellations and dynamics must also be considered, particularly with regard to the differing abilities of global and regional actors to exercise or project power in specific areas of strategic interest. During the Cold War, for instance, it was inconsequential that the Eastern Bloc's leading nation was economically far inferior to its global rival and lacked the maritime power to challenge the United States on the world's oceans. The geopolitical importance of the Soviet Union stemmed from its land power and ability to dominate a geostrategic pivot area – Halford Mackinder's Euro-Asian heartland.¹⁹

The world's leading economic regions were, nevertheless, North America and Western Europe, with Japan joining later. Due to their geostrategic and geo-economic relevance for both superpowers, Western Europe and, to a lesser extent, East Asia became central arenas in their struggle for supremacy. In 1943, Nicholas Spykman identified these two regions as the main theaters of a potential future conflict, arguing that the balance of power in Eurasia directly affected U.S. security. Although Spykman died the same year, he became one of the masterminds behind U.S. Cold War strategies from 1947 onward.²⁰ These strategies emphasized control over the West European and East Asian "green water" littorals and "brown water" riverines as key to securing the North American coastlines.²¹ Establishing a permanent military presence in countries such as Germany, Italy, Japan, and South Korea was a logical by-product of this shift in U.S. security policy.

Since the end of the Cold War, the rise of China and other non-Western states has significantly altered the global distribution of power. As a result, East Asia

¹⁸ Aslı Aydınışbaş et al., "Strategic Interdependence: Europe's New Approach in a World of Middle Powers," Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, October 3, 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/strategic-interdependence-europes-new-approach-in-a-world-of-middle-powers/>.

¹⁹ Halford Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot to History," *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904): 421-437, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1775498>.

²⁰ The logic of containment firstly articulated by George F. Kennan in 1947 reflected reasoning from Spykman's writings. Antero Holmila, "Re-thinking Nicholas J. Spykman: From Historical Sociology to Balance of Power," *The International History Review* 42, no. 5 (2019): 951-966, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2019.1655469>.

²¹ Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944), 49-55.

and the now-united Europe have switched ranks as the world's geostrategic and geo-economic key regions. Additionally, South Asia and Southeast Asia are positioning themselves to become the fourth powerhouse of the global economy.²² These are significant shifts, but some crucial elements of international politics remain essentially unchanged. Although Russia's military and economic influence has diminished, the country will retain its geostrategic position at the heart of Eurasia and its ability to exercise or project power into surrounding regions. This will be particularly relevant for strategic competition. In this context, both Asia and Europe will continue to play key roles as theaters for future conflicts or power contests. Therefore, the United States would be ill-advised to depart from a long-standing and proven principle of its security policy by focusing its engagement on only one theater.

Strategic Competition Involves More Actors Than China and the United States

The Sino-American rivalry is undeniably a dominant feature driving strategic competition. However, other states and groups of states will also influence the outcome of this global contest. Five articles in this issue, therefore, focus on what are arguably the most important actors in this context. Alongside China and the United States, these include the European Union, India, and Russia. The article by May-Britt Stumbaum and Sharon De Cet, "China's 'Natural Return' to the Center – Beijing's Perspective on Strategic Competition, Drivers, and Alternative Models for World Order," highlights the perspective of the Chinese state and party leadership on strategic competition. Unsurprisingly, the bilateral struggle for global supremacy is central to Beijing's considerations. China's growing role and influence are viewed as a return to the natural state of affairs. Drawing on ancient concepts and driven by historically shaped preferences for control and dominance, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) presents the idea of a "community of shared future for mankind" as an alternative to the Western-shaped, rules-based order. The CCP envisions a hierarchical, China-centric world order, with Beijing at its core, engaging with subordinate states for the "benefit of all."

The emphasis on the bipolar features of the emerging international order is shared by both Beijing and Washington, reflecting the U.S.- and China-centric perspectives in both capitals. Nonetheless, the key concepts underlying the notion of strategic competition have primarily been developed in the United States. Matt Neumeyer's article "Strategic Competition and U.S. National Strategies" highlights how this has helped reframe American strategic thought, particularly in national security and military strategies, and how these documents define the

²² OECD, *Economic Outlook for Southeast Asia, China and India 2024: Developing amid Disaster Risks* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1787/3bbe7dfe-en>; V. Anantha Nageswaran and Gurvinder Kaur, "Don't Bet Against India: New Delhi's Brewing Economic Comeback," *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 1 (January-February 2023), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/dont-bet-against-india>

threats to American primacy and the rules-based international order. However, the term “strategic competition” is not universally understood within the U.S. government, leading to different perspectives on how to proceed. Additionally, it does not adequately address how competitors approach international competition, creating a risk of miscalculation and increasing the chance of conflict. Accordingly, while strategic competition serves as a necessary framework to guide American strategy and strategic calculus, it remains a somewhat vague concept.

Many observers in Washington and Beijing attribute to Russia the role of a secondary regional power in the context of strategic competition. However, Graeme Herd emphasizes in his article “The Atlanticist Anglo-Saxon Reich and All That: How Russia Understands Strategic Confrontation” that the Kremlin continues to play a central role in the ideological conflict between the democratic West and its challengers. He illustrates this with the use of the term “Anglo-Saxon” in Russian propaganda. Its meanings are open-ended, dynamic, and evolving, and its applications tend to be context-sensitive. The term symbolizes a “collective West” allegedly intent on destabilizing Russia. The supposed threat posed by “Anglo-Saxons” is used to justify political choices, legitimize internal order, characterize Russia’s alternative geopolitical identity, and project a vision of its preferred global order. The article identifies three core ways in which the official discourse deploys the “Anglo-Saxon” concept:

- 1) “Anglo-Saxon Atlanticists” and the “collective West”;
- 2) the “Anglo-Saxon Reich” – encompassing the “fascist Anglo-Saxons elite” and “Ordinary Nazis”; and,
- 3) “Anglo-Saxons” as the “Fifth Column” and “Foreign Agents.”²³

The Kremlin’s anti-Western propaganda resonates not only in states of the Global South but also within certain segments of Western societies. Consequently, Russia will continue to maintain an influential role on the international stage in this field.

The European Union is perhaps the most poorly understood actor in international politics due to its elusive character – more than a community of states but less than a nation-state. Katrin Bastian elaborates on the prevailing view of strategic competition in Brussels in her article “The European Union and Strategic Competition.” The European Union perceives the world as multipolar, with countries of the Global South expanding their political and economic influence alongside the rivalry between the United States and China. Cooperation, compromise, and multilateral engagement are central to the EU’s mode of operation. The European Union and its member states favor this approach in shaping international relations. However, in a security environment characterized by strategic competition, the European Union, as the world’s largest trading bloc, must assert its

²³ Graeme Herd, “The Atlanticist Anglo-Saxon Reich and All That: How Russia Understands Strategic Confrontation,” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 23, no. 2 (2024): 44-69, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.23.2.04>.

role. “Strategic interdependence” appears to be the EU’s response to navigating the complexities of a changing world.²⁴

Despite some differences in worldview, the European Union and India share the belief that a multipolar world order is emerging. In “India’s Stake and Role in the U.S.-China Strategic Competition,” Vinay Kaura examines India’s position and role within the context of strategic competition. The analysis of India’s strategic vision—particularly the changing dynamics of its bilateral ties with the United States, China, and Russia—reveals that New Delhi’s foreign policy toward Washington is increasingly shaped by developments in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, as well as by the evolving dynamics of the U.S. relationships with key Asian powers. India has assumed a prominent role in Washington’s efforts to uphold a rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific. The existence of some shared values has been leveraged by both parties to deepen engagement, which has also been driven by pragmatic considerations. At the same time, maintaining close relations with Russia remains a strategic necessity for India. However, New Delhi has shown a noticeable shift in its approach toward the U.S.-China strategic rivalry, reflecting India’s changing perception of China – from a partner to a security threat.

Regional Dynamics Influence the Outcome of Strategic Competition

Four articles in this issue of *Connections* delve into the internal dynamics of different regions that have the potential to significantly influence the outcome of strategic competition at a global level. The so-called Indo-Pacific is frequently perceived as the most critical region in this regard. Its numerous ethnic, territorial, and maritime disputes not only threaten to destabilize individual states and the region but also pose risks to the international system. The rivalry between China and the United States adds another layer of complexity to these regional dynamics. Zenel Garcia explores the role of the Indo-Pacific in the broader framework of strategic competition, analyzing the perceptions and interests of key actors in the region. She argues that these actors are exercising their agency in ways that constrain or co-opt the Chinese-U.S. rivalry to advance their own interests. By revealing the region’s intricate realities, her conclusions challenge the emerging Cold War 2.0 discourse, which envisions Washington and Beijing forming two coherent blocs competing for influence.

Strategic competition is also unfolding in other regions of the world. The Black Sea region (BSR) has become prominent in global geopolitics, geo-economics, and strategic considerations. In their article, “Navigating the Trilemma of (In)security: Strategic Competition in the Black Sea Region,” Victoria Vdovychenko, Natalia Albu, and Nika Chitadze introduce the concept of strategic trilemmas in the BSR, involving the active participation of Türkiye, Ukraine, and

²⁴ Katrin Bastian, “The European Union and Strategic Competition,” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 23, no. 2 (2024): 70-89, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.23.2.11>.

pro-Western littoral states (Romania, Bulgaria, and Georgia) on one side, and Russia on the other. The region's dynamic and complex geopolitical landscape presents a series of trilemmas for the major actors involved. While Russia's influence remains a concern, the potential for reducing its dominance and increasing cooperation between Western countries and the BSR states offers bilateral and multilateral collaboration opportunities in this critical geopolitical theater.

The High North has gained increased importance due to climate change, the emergence of new shipping routes, and expanded opportunities for the exploitation of natural resources. Rachael Gosnell's article "A Divided Arctic: Is an Ice Curtain Emerging?" examines the factors enabling expanded cooperation among like-minded Western Arctic nations and between Russia and China. Climate change is a critical driver of regional activity, with warming trends affecting the region's economic development, infrastructure, and military activity. With Western sanctions restricting technological and economic cooperation with Russia, China is well-positioned to fill the gap. However, the emergence of an "ice curtain" separating the Western like-minded Arctic nations from a Russian-Chinese Arctic partnership is not a foregone conclusion. First, while European Arctic capitals have recognized the threat posed by Russia, they differ from Washington in their approach to China. Second, it remains uncertain whether Russia will choose to give the keys to its Arctic kingdom to China or pursue a political settlement in Ukraine.

In contrast, Africa is often perceived as a peripheral arena in the strategic competition between the great powers. This view is challenged by Elikem Fiamavle, Aida Marie Stéphanie Naoule, and Martin Schuster in their article "Unfolding Geopolitical Events Suggest a New Order in Strategic Competition – Perspectives from West Africa." They argue that the prospects of a multipolar international order have influenced how African countries interact with the rest of the world. African states have entered an era of choice. Narratives that once portrayed Africa as the "Dark Continent" are shifting to depict it as a "rising continent" engaging with an increasing number of non-Western actors, mostly emerging economies, including China, the Gulf States, India, and Türkiye. Several African governments have increasingly embraced economic, diplomatic, and security ties with Russia. Russia's renewed interest in Africa is driven by its pursuit of global power status. Africa's abundant strategic resources and promising growth prospects grant its leaders significant influence in modern geopolitics. Therefore, the authors argue that Africa's importance in strategic competition should not be underestimated. Africa's relationship with the Political West has been complex, with both positive and negative impacts on the continent. Frustration among Africans toward Western powers stems from the belief that promises of democracy leading to development and economic growth are illusory. Generating trust and credibility will require greater transparency from the United States and Europe regarding their interests, minimizing policy incoherencies, and narrowing the prevailing disparities between Western offerings and African needs.

Hybrid Threats Pose a Particular Challenge to the West

Africa, in particular, demonstrates that the Political West is being challenged in ways that extend far beyond the realms of politics and the military. Propaganda and disinformation, for example, are powerful hybrid weapons employed by opponents of the West in strategic competition. These tactics resonate strongly, especially in regions where Western promises of progress and prosperity remain unfulfilled, amplifying anti-Western narratives. In her article “Hybrid Threats and Strategic Competition,” Heather Gregg argues that the ability of state and non-state actors to directly influence populations through a range of quick and non-attributable activities marks a departure from previous iterations of strategic competition. These hybrid threats pose a direct challenge to state sovereignty and represent a key distinguishing feature of strategic competition today. Her article highlights the importance of building resilience within populations to counter such hybrid threats.

Strategic competition with China and Russia is also a contest for the support of countries in other parts of the world. Falk Tettweiler’s article “Strategic Competition and the Battle of Narratives: A Sociopsychological Perspective” elaborates on the often-underestimated role of strategic narratives. Summarizing the key points of the strategic narratives of China, Russia, and the United States, he discusses the implications that a competitive mindset might have on humanity’s ability to address critical global security challenges. Overemphasizing the concept of strategic competition could exacerbate the dilemma of competing while simultaneously needing to cooperate. Leaders who have embraced this competitive mindset must find a careful balance here. Unfortunately, the Russian leadership’s fear- and threat-driven perception of reality leaves little room for concession or compromise. Against this background, the Russian leadership currently represents the greatest obstacle and threat to collaborative solutions to global challenges.

Finally, Ralf Roloff’s article examines cross-cutting economic trends that will significantly influence the outcome of strategic competition at the global level. Increasing tensions due to strategic competition, geopolitical shifts, and external shocks—including the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021, and Russia’s war against Ukraine since February 2022—have placed the global economy under significant stress. International trade, foreign direct investment, and global value chains have been redirected, diversified, and de-risked. Rather than leading to deglobalization, this has resulted in a “fragmentegrated” global economy that is simultaneously fragmented and integrated at regional and global levels. The world economy is not decoupled but remains deeply interconnected. However, the “fragmentegrated” global economy is exposed to an increasing weaponization of economic interdependence, which instrumentalizes all sectors of the multilateral system.

In summary, the focus of the strategic competition debate on China versus the United States and bipolarity versus multipolarity is not well-suited to fully capture the diverse political, military, and economic developments at the global

and regional levels. The international system has become increasingly fluid, complex, and fragmented. In this “era of choice,” nonaligned countries are in a position to negotiate with various interested powers and ultimately choose the best option from different worlds on a case-by-case basis. Furthermore, the emerging new landscape also provides regional powers traditionally aligned with the Political West, such as Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, with greater opportunities for maneuvering and achieving strategic autonomy.

Conclusion

Strategic competition extends beyond a confrontation between two superpowers and their respective allies. It is also a contest for the support of nonaligned countries that do not belong to either the Political West or the group of challengers such as China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia. While the Western focus on the challenge posed by China may seem plausible, it limits a broader and deeper understanding of other important trends and dynamics shaping strategic competition across different regions of the world. Acknowledging the reality of a more complex global constellation opens up new perspectives on the political and economic challenges ahead and facilitates the exploration of Western approaches to bridging gaps with nonaligned countries. Therefore, the Political West would be wise to recognize the perceptions and needs of this “target audience.”²⁵

In this context, both China and Russia are opponents of the West. Russia’s narrative is a toxic mix of radical geopolitics and anti-Western resentment. Surprisingly, this narrative is quite popular in the Global South, even though the Kremlin is clearly attempting to divide the world into zones of influence controlled by a few great powers. On the other hand, China’s narrative is firmly based on the principles of state sovereignty and the rejection of “external interference” – except, apparently, in the case of Ukraine. Like the Russian narrative, it resonates with many countries in the Global South. However, beyond that, China seems to offer something more: a viable economic alternative to the West.²⁶

Against this background, the Political West needs to regain the initiative and actively promote its competitive advantage. It should recognize that any approach engaging nonaligned countries through values-based diplomacy will be more credible and sustainable than the purely transactional alternatives offered by its opponents.²⁷ India is of critical importance in this context. It perceives itself

²⁵ Katrin Bastian et al., “Perspectives on Strategic Competition,” George C. Marshall Center Policy Brief No. 1, November 2024, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/policy-briefs/perspectives-strategic-competition>.

²⁶ Elizabeth Economy, “China’s Alternative Order: And What America Should Learn from It,” *Foreign Affairs* 103, no. 3 (May/June 2024), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-alternative-order-xi-jinping-elizabeth-economy>.

²⁷ Graeme P. Herd, Falk Tettweiler, Katrin Bastian, and Frank Hagemann, “‘Normative Strategic Competition in an Era of Choice,’ Symposium Aide Memoire, Federal Ministry

in a leadership role and as a “bridge between North and South,” committed to maintaining and further developing a rules-based liberal world order. The United States has emphasized this role in its Joint Regional Strategy for South Asia, and the European Union has taken steps to strengthen ties with India. Providing greater support to India could also benefit the region and improve the perception of the West in the Global South. Encouraging the development of an additional pole in South Asia and thereby fostering the rules-based liberal world order through close cooperation between the United States, Europe, India, Japan, and other interested countries could help contain bilateral conflicts and reduce tensions at the global and regional levels.²⁸

The “unipolar moment” that has defined the international system since the collapse of the Soviet Union has come to an end. The United States, in particular, needs to adapt its policies to this new reality. However, European states and the European Union must also consider how to position themselves in this context and decide what policies to pursue. This is not about turning away from the United States; rather, Europeans must ask themselves what role they should play in strategic competition alongside their Transatlantic and Indo-Pacific partners.

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²⁸ Bastian et al., “Perspectives on Strategic Competition.”



China's 'Natural Return' to the Center – Beijing's Perspective on Strategic Competition, Drivers, and Alternative Models for World Order

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Abstract: The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sees the growing role and influence of the People's Republic of China as a return to the natural state of affairs. Building on ancient concepts like *Tian Xia* and driven by historically shaped preferences for control and dominance, the CCP proposes a “community of shared future for mankind” as an alternative to the Western-shaped rules-based order – a China-centric, hierarchical world order with Beijing at its core, engaging with subordinate states to the “benefit of all.” This article introduces Beijing's perception of strategic competition, its main interests and drivers, and the avenues it pursues to promote its alternative world order.

Keywords: Tian Xia, New World Order, Chinese Communist Party, CCP, strategic competition, Global South, Xi Jinping

Introduction

While Western powers may view China's rise with anxiety, and at times with amazement, China perceives its growing prominence on the global stage as a return to the natural state of affairs. In the view of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—which governs the People's Republic as a one-party-state with authoritarian characteristics—the U.S.-China competition since the Cold War has primarily been over regional order in the Asia-Pacific, and more recently, over the global order. The impact of the Trump Administration, U.S. engagement in Afghanistan, a perceived withdrawal of the United States from the Indo-Pacific arena, alongside allegations of U.S. isolationism from the international stage,

have been portrayed by Chinese president Xi as making the twenty-first century a “period of historical opportunity”¹ for China’s rise. With the People’s Republic of China (PRC) having reached significant economic and military power status, U.S.-China competition has now extended beyond the Asia Pacific region, spurring into a contest for a new world order.

China does not intend simply to replace the United States as the hegemonic power. The CCP’s ambition is to remold both the Chinese nation and the world through ideological, political, economic, and military means, all integrated into a single, centrally steered grand strategy. Recent geopolitical events and China’s rapid ascension as a global power often make it challenging for the West to explain China’s behavior and inscribe it into a simple geopolitical narrative. Nevertheless, many Western countries still interpret China’s foreign policy—and shape their own China strategies—within the framework of traditional international relations theory.

The mismatch between China’s pattern of growth, its behavior, and the expectations of other global powers has inevitably made Beijing the focus of an international debate about the current global order, where China has been repeatedly confronted regarding its views on international relations and the existing *status quo*. This debate has been accompanied by fears and doubts about Beijing’s intentions and ambitions, with China often challenged to explain its positions, though with limited success.

The implications of the Chinese vision of world order remain unclear. Some countries have called Xi Jinping’s world vision “unacceptable,”² and Beijing’s initiatives—such as the Belt and Road, the Global Security Initiative, and the “12-point peace proposal”³ presented on the anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—are largely viewed with suspicion by the United States and its major allies. However, according to Chinese sources, countries of the so-called “Global South” appear to be more receptive. The China Institute of International Studies and the Chinese Center for Global Security Initiative Studies released a report claiming that more than 100 countries, as well as various international and regional organizations, have provided support for and appreciation of China’s

¹ “Speech by Xi Jinping at the Opening Ceremony of the Seminar on ‘Learning and Implementing the Spirit of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Party,’” *Xinhua*, January 11, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2021-01/11/c_1126970918.htm. - in Chinese

² Comment by U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken in an address outlining the Administration’s policy toward the People’s Republic of China: Antony J. Blinken, “The Administration’s Approach to the People’s Republic of China,” Speech, U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C., May 26, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.

³ Associated Press, “What Is China’s Peace Proposal for Ukraine War?” *The Diplomat*, February 24, 2023, accessed February 27, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/what-is-chinas-peace-proposal-for-ukraine-war/>.

Global Security Initiative (GSI).⁴ According to the Chinese government, more than 80 countries support also its Global Civilization Initiative.⁵

Despite its rise to a global leadership position, China asserts that it is not an imperialist power and has no hegemonic intentions. Xi Jinping defends the Chinese world vision as one of a “community of shared future for mankind,” a phrase more directly translated from Chinese as “a common destiny for mankind.” This slogan, first introduced by former CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao, has been frequently cited by current General Secretary Xi Jinping, to the extent that it was incorporated into the preamble of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China during its 2018 amendment.⁶

The question then arises: How can China’s expanding international influence and its global competition with the United States be reconciled with its assertion of non-hegemonic intentions? One possible explanation lies in China’s concept of world order, which integrates statecraft, nation-to-nation relations, and global governance under the same guiding principle, known as *Tian Xia* 天下, “everything under heaven.”⁷ In a rough sense, *Tian Xia* envisions China as the benign hegemon at the center, surrounded by tributary states. In this paradigm, borders transcend, and the world is seen as a unified sphere with China at its center. “China in the old days had no concept of a well-defined boundary. A marker stone would be used to define a region, not a border.”⁸ In contemporary discussions of *Tian Xia*, the PRC’s “re-emergence” as a great power is viewed as an opportunity to reshape the Western-centric international system with a system that is perceived as superior to the United Nations framework, which is often characterized as a political marketplace focused on parochial national interests.⁹

⁴ Xinhua, “China Releases Report on Implementation of Global Security Initiative,” The State Council, The People’s Republic of China, July 19, 2024, accessed July 29, 2024, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202407/19/content_WS669999e74c6d0868f4e8e93eb.html.

⁵ Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Independent State of Samoa, “Initiatives Proposed by China, Fruitful Outcomes Shared by World,” May 22, 2023, accessed July 29, 2024, http://ws.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwtdt/202305/t20230522_11081047.htm.

⁶ “Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, preamble,” updated November 20, 2019, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/lawsregulations/201911/20/content_WS5ed8856ec6d0b3f0e9499913.html.

⁷ Literally meaning “all under heaven,” *Tian Xia* (天下) refers to a system of governance held together by a regime of culture and values that transcends racial and geographical boundaries. Ban Wang, ed., *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics* (Duke University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822372448>.

⁸ Shiu Sin Por, “Tianxia: China’s Concept of International Order,” *Global Asia* 15, no. 2 (June 2020): 44-50, https://www.globalasia.org/v15no2/cover/tianxia-chinas-concept-of-international-order_shiu-sin-por.

⁹ Suisheng Zhao, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023), 120-121.

This article will attempt to describe how Beijing views the world and how working processes and concepts like *Tian Xia* are shaping a vision for a global order that challenges the existing system, grounded on liberal and democratic principles.

Beijing's Perspective

The overarching goal of China's statecraft, as envisioned under *Tian Xia*, is to reshape global relations into a China-centric, hierarchical world order with Beijing at its core, engaging with subordinate states. To illustrate this concept, we can draw parallels to Xi Jinping's 2017 speech at the United Nations Office in Geneva, where he referred to the China-led world order as a "community,"¹⁰ invoking the Latin motto *Unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno* – "One for all, all for one."

While Xi Jinping did not explicitly mention the Chinese worldview *Tian Xia* in that speech, it is intriguing to note that the phrase is often employed in monotheistic contexts. In religious settings, the emphasis is on the existence of a single god, whereas under *Tian Xia*, China's interactions with the outside world are rooted in the monistic assertion of the CCP as the exclusive and indivisible core of the nation-state. This monistic concept traces back to imperial times when the emperor—much like the CCP today—held the sole claim to truth. Xi Jinping openly seeks to position himself as the contemporary custodian of China's traditions. If *Tian Xia* represents China's understanding of the world, Xi Jinping can be likened to the "Son of Heaven," overseeing temporal power, or *Tian Chao*.¹¹

The party's adherence to this orthodoxy gained momentum after the 20th Congress of the CCP when Xi Jinping underscored the importance of preserving the "great founding spirit of the Party and the spirit of Yan'an." Xi's deliberate choice to pay homage to the Revolution Shrine in Yan'an, where Mao Zedong asserted ideological supremacy, signals a centralized and personalized approach to power. This metaphor also recalls an era when the CCP was entrenched in a challenging civil war, possibly reflecting Beijing's perception of the current geopolitical landscape as hostile. This perception was underscored in Xi's speech at

¹⁰ As Steve Tsang points out, "Community of Shared Future for Mankind" is a propaganda slogan from the CCP, while the direct translation would equal "common destiny of mankind," indicating it is—in their view—inevitable and not something up for discussion. See CSIS China Power Project Podcast, "The Political Thought of Xi Jinping: A Conversation with Dr. Steve Tsang," *China Power*, March 28, 2024, accessed July 29, 2024, <https://chinapower.csis.org/podcasts/the-political-thought-of-xi-jinping/>.

¹¹ Literally meaning "heavenly empire," the *Tian Chao* (天朝) concept has been extremely significant in fostering Chinese nationalism and support for the Emperor, painted as the "Son of Heaven." From Arthur Cotterell, *The Imperial Capitals of China: An Inside View of the Celestial Empire* (Random House, 2011). Also see Didi Kirsten Tatlow, "China's Cosmological Communism: A Challenge to Liberal Democracies," *China Monitor*, Mercator Institute for China Studies, July 18, 2018, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://merics.org/en/report/chinas-cosmological-communism-challenge-liberal-democracies>.

the 20th National People's Congress in 2022, where he framed the U.S.-led liberal world order as a major impediment to Beijing's "heavenly mandate."

The recollection of historical conflicts plays a pivotal role in China's nation-building and the CCP's self-legitimization, control, and strategic positioning globally.¹² According to Beijing, three significant losses since the 19th century continue to influence its statecraft. The first loss was territorial, resulting from the Sino-Japanese War, during which Japan gained control of Taiwan and other Chinese territories. The second loss pertains to international standing and dignity, stemming from the Opium Wars, which, according to Xi Jinping, reduced China to a "semi-colonial, semi-feudal society" through "unequal treaties." These treaties restricted China's access to new technologies, contributing to a technological gap with the West – a factor Beijing considers crucial to its subsequent decline. The third loss refers to the loss of political control due to foreign interference, leading to the civil war of 1945-1949. This conflict ultimately ended the "Century of Humiliation" with the establishment of the People's Republic of China under Mao Zedong.

These historical losses profoundly shape China's worldview, prompting the CCP to seek greater autonomy, self-sufficiency, and a more assertive foreign policy. For over two centuries, these losses have driven Beijing to pursue three main priorities relentlessly: domestic prosperity and control, international stability, and technological leadership.

Linking China's loss-driven mindset to its contemporary vision of world order, it is evident that China's pursuit of autarchy under *Tian Xia* is not merely a strategy to legitimize the CCP's domestic leadership but an endeavor to shape a new global governance model aligned with Chinese values and interests. As a monistic political system, China does not seamlessly interact with pluralistic political systems in the U.S.-led world order. Consequently, China strives to establish a hierarchical world order, positioning itself at the apex, driven by the goal of self-preservation.¹³

Strategic Competition

It is crucial to emphasize that, from the standpoint of the CCP, the ongoing strategic rivalry with the United States is not merely perceived as a clash of interests; rather, it is viewed as a means to secure and uphold China's sovereignty and territorial integrity— and, by extension, control over all matters pertaining to China—while simultaneously restoring its global prestige and dignity. Consequently, China positions itself as a foundational element in a novel world order characterized by distinct Chinese attributes. In this framework, Beijing does not perceive itself as a growing power ready to challenge the *status quo* but rather

¹² Vincent K.L. Chang, "China's New Historical Statecraft: Reviving the Second World War for National Rejuvenation," *International Affairs* 98, no. 3 (May 2022): 1053-1069, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia021>.

¹³ Tatlow, "China's Cosmological Communism: A Challenge to Liberal Democracies."

as a “potent force for peace.”¹⁴ In engaging in competition with the United States, China aims to foster partnerships and alliances to establish its envisioned “heavenly empire,” distinct from being seen as an “honorary member of the West.”¹⁵

As its inaugural act on the global stage, Beijing seized the global focus on the Olympic Games on February 4, 2022, to present its concept of a “multipolar world order.” By formally announcing its “no limits partnership” with Russia, China began shaping the international order to align with CCP interests. This vision is intended to be shared with strategic regional allies, such as Russia, which is considered a valuable partner in countering U.S. influence in the region. Since then, both nations have supported each other in confrontations with the West over Ukraine and Taiwan. They have pledged to intensify collaboration in pushing back U.S.-aligned regional actors and implementing a “regionalization” of both economy and security in the Indo-Pacific. However, despite the two countries doubling down on their alliance this year, the commercial relationship between Beijing and Moscow remains quite complex. The possibility of U.S. and EU sanctions on Chinese businesses that may allow Russia to obtain technologies¹⁶ required for its weapons represents a real limit to the China-Russia partnership, highlighting how the relationship between Moscow and Beijing remains heavily troubled and dependent on Beijing’s economic prosperity.

Promoting Domestic Prosperity through Regional Economic Stability ...

China employs economic and diplomatic connections as pivotal instruments in the ongoing strategic competition with the United States in the Indo-Pacific region. This area is strategically important to Beijing, serving as a contingency network to counter potential U.S.-led attempts to decouple China from global supply chains. Xi Jinping’s vision of an “Asia-Pacific Community with a Shared Future” outlines an alternative hub-and-spokes model, where China is positioned as the central hub connecting individual nations in a distributed supply chain network.

From Beijing’s perspective, this model serves both China’s domestic prosperity and its foreign policy objectives in the Indo-Pacific region. Domestically, Xi

¹⁴ Qin Gang, Chinese Ambassador to the United States, “How China Sees the World,” *The National Interest*, December 26, 2022, accessed February 19, 2024, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-china-sees-world-206058>.

¹⁵ Quote by Former Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, reported in Graham Allison and Robert Blackwill, “Interview: Lee Kuan Yew on the Future of U.S.-China Relations,” Book excerpt, *The Atlantic*, March 5, 2013, accessed February 27, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/03/interview-lee-kuan-yew-on-the-future-of-us-china-relations/273657/>.

¹⁶ Lisa O’Carroll, “EU Proposes Sanctions on Chinese Firms Aiding Russian War Effort,” *The Guardian*, February 14, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/14/eu-proposes-sanctions-on-chinese-firms-aiding-russian-war-effort>.

Jinping introduced the concept of “dual circulation”¹⁷ to ensure China’s development and attain “common prosperity.” Incorporating the dual circulation concept into the CCP’s constitution underscores that combating hostile U.S. efforts—such as those aimed at limiting China’s access to high technology and products—is not only the CCP’s *raison d’être* but also China’s *raison d’État*.

Amid trade tensions between the United States and China, this vision supports and upholds the “dual circulation” model for China’s national prosperity and fosters a robust economic partnership between Beijing and Indo-Pacific countries. China has remained ASEAN’s largest trading partner since 2009, and since 2020, ASEAN has become China’s largest trading partner for three consecutive years.¹⁸

... and Contributing to International Development While Ensuring Domestic Economic Independence and Extending Influence

By adopting a growth model centered on the national market while facilitating interaction between domestic and foreign regional markets, Xi Jinping aims to reduce China’s dependence on U.S. markets and technology. This strategy seeks to create a more resilient, prosperous, and sustainable economy that will not be “strangled by foreign countries.”¹⁹ A thriving domestic economy will, in turn, legitimize China as a leading member of the “big family of developing countries,” helping shape a new international order aligned with CCP interests and ensuring the survival of the CCP.

An example of how China uses the “Global South” as an arena for strategic competition is the recent enlargement of BRICS, which now includes Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Ethiopia. Three of these six countries are major oil producers, suggesting how BRICS has become another platform for Beijing to advance a CCP-centric narrative. At the recent summit in Johannesburg, the group called for reform of Bretton Woods institutions, “including a greater role for emerging markets and developing countries.” While BRICS still faces internal misalignments, the organization clearly serves as a channel to promote China’s vision of the world order, with the goal of redesigning perceived “pro-Western” institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to better align with Chinese interests.

¹⁷ Alicia García Herrero, “What Is Behind China’s Dual Circulation Strategy,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 69 (Fall 2021), <https://www.prleader.org/post/what-is-behind-china-s-dual-circulation-strategy>.

¹⁸ See the “Chairman’s Statement of the 26th ASEAN-China Summit,” Jakarta, Indonesia, September 6, 2023, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-26th-ASEAN-China-Summit.pdf>.

¹⁹ Frank Tang, “Xi Jinping Says China Must Quicken Pace of Tech Self-reliance to Prevent Being ‘Strangled by Foreign Countries,’” *South China Morning Post*, February 2, 2023, accessed February 19, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3208882/xi-jinping-says-china-must-quicken-pace-tech-self-reliance-prevent-being-strangled-foreign-countries>.

China's Pursuit of "Comprehensive National Security" in the New World Order

To achieve its dual objectives of regime preservation and international development, the CCP must secure and control strategic assets while fostering a stable international environment. In pursuit of these goals, China adopts a "whole-of-society approach,"²⁰ involving all branches of government, the military, private companies, organizations, and the diaspora. Over time, the concept of security in CCP ideology has expanded beyond Mao's political, territorial, and military focus to include broader aspects such as food, space, society, and the environment – all encompassed under a "security paradigm." Xi Jinping refers to this exhaustive approach as "comprehensive national security," a concept that traces its roots back to the PRC's founding in 1949. Given the borderless nature of *Tian Xia*, the concept intertwines party, national, and international security. This operational strategy has required Beijing to bridge civilian and military sectors, breaking traditional silos, sharing expertise, centrally funding dual-use technology, and undertaking research and development initiatives to harness science and innovation for strategic objectives, including enhancing military capabilities and promoting economic development.

At the Core: Strategic Competition in the Indo-Pacific and Southern Pacific

In pursuit of these goals, the Indo-Pacific region, particularly the Pacific Islands, emerges as a critical investment zone for both Washington and Beijing. The United States has historically been a dominant power in the Indo-Pacific, maintaining a significant military presence. In the post-war period, it established the foundation of the regional security structure through ironclad treaty alliances, promoting a democratic and liberal model of growth with countries such as Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand.

Given that the U.S.-led model for the Indo-Pacific does not align with Beijing's perspective on world order, it is unsurprising that China strategically employs diplomatic influence—primarily through security agreements and targeted investments—to gain access to vital strategic assets, particularly dual-use infrastructures.

In the Pacific Islands, China's political and diplomatic maneuvers against the United States go beyond the islands' interests, advancing Beijing's agenda by granting access to geostrategic hotspots and potentially enhancing China's role as a security actor. Ideologically, China also cultivates regional allies who may

²⁰ For a comprehensive analysis refer to Katja Drinhausen and Helena Legarda, "'Comprehensive National Security' Unleashed: How Xi's Approach Shapes China's Policies at Home and Abroad," *China Monitor*, MERICS, September 15, 2022, accessed February 19, 2024, <https://merics.org/en/report/comprehensive-national-security-unleashed-how-xis-approach-shapes-chinas-policies-home-and>.

support its claims over Taiwan in exchange for economic and security partnerships.²¹ However, Beijing's push for the regionalization of security under Chinese guidance, framed around the narrative of the Asia-Pacific as "no one's backyard,"²² appears to have encountered challenges. Last May, the Pacific Islands declined China's offer of a comprehensive trade and security deal.

While U.S.-China relations had been on a downward spiral in recent years, fueled by a sense of pessimism stemming from the trade war, growing technology competition, the Taiwan Strait crisis, and contrasting approaches to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the summit between Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping last November marked the zenith of a year-long process that helped calm tensions. This was due to several factors contributing to the "reset" of competition. For China, these factors included reduced financial engagements in the Pacific, which were linked to post-COVID recovery, coupled with increased U.S. credibility in providing defensive support to Taiwan and its allies. This credibility has been bolstered through the development of the Quad, AUKUS, and improved bilateral relations with countries around China's periphery. These elements will represent a setback for Beijing's strategy, likely prompting it to continue focusing its diplomatic and financial efforts on initiatives that yield greater influence at lower costs while concentrating on geostrategic hotspots that align with China's domestic goals.

Addressing the Void: China's Economic Opening

While some nations in the Indo-Pacific region still perceive a rising authoritarian China as a security concern, Beijing's economic influence remains strong across several countries. This is especially evident following then-President Donald Trump's withdrawal of the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) and President Biden's limited efforts to provide a mechanism for Asia-Pacific economies to access the U.S. market. In this vacuum, China has positioned itself as the leader of the Asia-Pacific economic bloc, solidified through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Meanwhile, the Biden administration has shown little interest in joining the rebranded Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) or

²¹ See for instance Beijing's 2022 security agreement with the Solomon Islands. More recently, after DPP's victory in Taiwan's presidential elections, Beijing also resumed ties with Nauru. Paul Millar, "China's Pacific Charm Offensive Pays off as Nauru Drops Taipei for Beijing," *France 24*, January 16, 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20240116-china-s-pacific-charm-offensive-pays-off-as-nauru-drops-taipei-for-beijing>.

²² "President Xi Jinping Delivered a Written Speech at the APEC CEO Summit, Underscoring China's Commitment to Building an Asia-Pacific Community with a Shared Future," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People's Republic of China, November 17, 2022, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2022/cxesgityjtjhtg/202211/t20221117_10977274.html; "Xi Urges Efforts to Carry Forward Great Founding Spirit of CPC and Yan'an Spirit," *Xinhua*, October 29, 2022, accessed February 27, 2023, http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202210/29/content_WS635c022ac6d0a757729e1e5a.html.

offering market access under the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF).²³

China's economic "opening up" plays a crucial role in navigating its strategic competition with the United States, as former Vice Premier Liu He highlighted during his speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos. He emphasized that "opening up to the world is a must, not an expediency,"²⁴ underscoring China's commitment to opposing unilateralism and protectionism while promoting international cooperation. In this context, Beijing engaged in consultations with Australia, a key player in the Indo-Pacific and a close U.S. ally, leading to the resumption of coal shipments from Australia to China after nearly two years. This move reflects the importance of Canberra in China's pursuit of strategic leadership in the Indo-Pacific, as favorable relations with Australia are seen as crucial for advancing China's application to join the CPTPP and strengthening economic ties in the Asia-Pacific. China recognizes that its improved ties with Canberra present a significant opportunity for enhancing the China-Australia economic and trade relationship.

Just as domestic prosperity solidifies the CCP's legitimacy, robust international economic ties are essential to securing China's envisioned world order. In the Indo-Pacific, the CCP's objectives are closely linked to Beijing's broader ambitions of positioning China as a global military, economic, and normative power.

Leveraging the United Front Work Department and More

The United Front Work Department (UNFWD) will play a pivotal role in the CCP's strategy, as Beijing aims to strengthen ties with political, business, and community leaders across the Indo-Pacific. This effort is essential to mitigate potential ideological and strategic setbacks resulting from a renewed American presence in the region. Under Xi Jinping, the UFWD has become increasingly integrated with the political leadership of the CCP, as demonstrated by the appointment of Shi Taifeng as both head of the UNFWD and a member of the Politburo during last October's political reshuffle. This indicates that China's global actions through the UFWD will closely align with domestic priorities, acting as key drivers for economic growth and party legitimacy.

As China intensifies its efforts to build an anti-Western bloc in the Indo-Pacific, United Front activities are expected to gain momentum. These efforts include influencing academic and policy discourses in the United States, engaging in political interference in Australia and New Zealand, and employing political

²³ The missed approval of the IPEF trade pillar for the Asia-Pacific might mean Washington could need to double down on its efforts in making progress for advancement of trade among its signatories and the broader APEC membership. Chris Dixon and Bob Savic, "After APEC: Whither US Leadership on Trade?" *The Diplomat*, December 15, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/after-apec-whither-us-leadership-on-trade/>.

²⁴ "Davos 2023: Special Address by Liu He, Vice-Premier of the People's Republic of China," *World Economic Forum*, January 17, 2023, accessed February 27, 2023, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/davos-2023-special-address-by-liu-he-vice-premier-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.

and hybrid warfare tactics in Taiwan. Notably, this trend aligns with the growing influence of members of the Central Military Commission (CMC) within the CCP leadership, signaling Beijing's intention to integrate national development, defense, and foreign policy in its strategic competition, particularly after the 20th Party Congress in October 2022.

China's approach in the Indo-Pacific is likely to involve selective engagement in areas directly aligned with Beijing's domestic objectives. Strengthening ties with Pacific countries, which are critical for securing the supply chain for essential raw materials like rare earth elements, will be a priority. At the same time, China will exert diplomatic pressure on Indo-Pacific countries to support its One China policy, leveraging trade and strategic agreements as negotiation tools. A recent example is the resumption of diplomatic relations between China and Nauru, which represented a significant win for Beijing, seeing its influence in the Pacific rise through strong economic and infrastructure investments. In this context, more concerted efforts and engagement from Taiwan and its Western allies will be necessary to counter Beijing's growing influence.

Conclusion: The Way Forward

The 2024 Munich Security Conference highlighted that in the dynamic landscape of U.S.-China strategic competition, 2024 has become a pivotal year in which the Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a focal point escalating tensions. China's assertive pursuit of a CCP-centric vision for regional order is met with vigorous resistance from the United States, its allies, and China's neighboring countries, creating a zero-sum dynamic. The concept of multi-alignment—joining various fora without having to choose sides—once preferred by many Indo-Pacific nations now faces mounting challenges due to the intensifying rivalry between China and the United States, whose respective development proposals often conflict. In response to this shifting geopolitical landscape, several regional actors are aligning more closely with the United States on security matters while actively seeking to reduce their economic reliance on China. However, the success of these efforts varies. At the same time, the relevance of inclusive cooperation within the ASEAN framework is waning, as like-minded countries in the region may increasingly turn to new minilateral frameworks designed to counterbalance Chinese influence while minimizing reliance on the West. This shift further intensifies the ongoing strategic competition between Beijing and Washington over the Indo-Pacific.

In the short term, it will be crucial for Washington, its allies, and like-minded partners to demonstrate their ability to translate strategic capabilities into sustained regional commitment, particularly in the economic realm, amid domestic challenges and trade issues. This can potentially be achieved by deploying a comprehensive strategy that confers to governmental agencies, such as the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, the crucial role of crafting a narrative of collaboration. This narrative should highlight Washington's multifaceted approach in the region, extending beyond security concerns to include

more practical development-oriented policies. Other influential actors and allies, such as Japan and the European Union, must also be included in this strategy to ensure that Indo-Pacific countries have a broader range of options that do not rely solely on Beijing or Washington. This is particularly important in areas where countries may feel uncomfortable choosing sides, such as green energy and infrastructure development.

Thus, relying on allies in this context is critical for contributing to the de-escalation of the competition between the United States and China. U.S. support for broader objectives, such as upholding the rules-based international order, can help refocus South Asian countries on subscribing to shared narratives and goals, such as countering immediate coercive Chinese actions in the South China Sea. Finally, global organizations like the United Nations or the International Monetary Fund can also contribute by promoting a positive narrative of Southeast Asia's unique development, reframing the region's story as one of empowerment rather than a battleground for superpowers.

Disclaimer

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Strategic Competition and U.S. National Strategies

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Abstract: Strategic competition has significantly reframed American strategic thought, particularly its national security and military strategies, by defining the threats to American primacy and the rules-based international order posed mainly by China and Russia. However, the term “strategic competition” is not universally understood within the U.S. government, leading to varying perspectives on how to proceed. Additionally, it does not adequately address how competitors approach international competition, creating a risk of miscalculation and an increased chance of conflict. Finally, for the United States, strategic competition establishes a framework that perpetuates challenges for American strategy and the use of elements of national power. While “strategic competition” is necessary to focus and drive American strategy and strategic calculus, it is also a vague and imperfect construct that could lead decision-makers down consequential paths.

Keywords: strategic competition, national security strategy, Russia, China, Thucydides Trap.

Introduction

Strategic competition is the current buzzphrase in American strategy, designed to capture the essence of the United States’ strategic framework. Like many catchphrases, it both succeeds and fails in equal measure. Both strategic competition and its predecessor, great power competition, have helped significantly shape American strategic thought, particularly in national security and military strategies. Strategic competition has also helped define the threats to American primacy and the rules-based international order it underpins, primarily from China and, to a lesser degree, Russia.

However, the term “strategic competition” is not universally understood within the U.S. government, resulting in differing perspectives on how to proceed. Moreover, it fails to adequately address how competitors approach international competition, creating a risk of miscalculation and increasing the chance of conflict. Finally, for the United States, strategic competition reinforces a conceptual framework known as the Thucydides Trap, perpetuating dilemmas for American strategy and its use of elements of national power. While strategic competition is necessary to focus and drive American strategy and strategic calculus, it is also a vague and risky term – an imperfect construct that can lead decision-makers down consequential paths.

This article attempts to answer the following questions regarding U.S. perspectives on strategic competition: Why does the United States use “strategic competition” as an organizing construct for its strategy and strategic approach? How does this concept manifest in American strategy? And what challenges arise from the U.S. perspectives on strategic competition?

Why Strategic Competition?

U.S. strategies began incorporating the term “competition” as the United States started to reduce its commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, China’s economic rise accelerated, and Russia continued its aggressive actions in “the near abroad.” The Obama administration introduced “competition” into the national security strategy, launching its “pivot to the Pacific” to counter China’s growing power and recognizing Russia’s revanchist behavior, exemplified by the annexation of Crimea.¹ However, the specific terms and phrases “great power competition” and “strategic competition” were reintroduced into the American lexicon in the national security strategies of the Trump and Biden administrations, respectively. In both documents, these terms served as harbingers, framing the security context each administration sought to address.

Strategic competition is not a new term. Stephanie Winkler does an excellent job tracing its usage from the 1970s détente period of the Cold War through the second Bush administration to the Trump and Biden administrations. During the Cold War, the term was used to describe the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. Over time, it evolved under the Bush, Trump, and Biden administrations to represent a “principal policy approach” – a goal to pursue.² However, as this article will argue, its current use in American strategy is problematic. Strategic competition is interpreted as both an end goal and a relational dynamic or as an objective versus a “state of play,” which leads to differing behaviors. Therefore, the U.S. dual interpretation of “strategic competition”

¹ Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, February 2015), 24, 29, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf.

² Stephanie Christine Winkler, “Strategic Competition and US-China Relations: A Conceptual Analysis,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 2023): 333-356, 334-335, 353, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poad008>.

both helps and hinders. While the term helps clarify the security context and identify threats, it complicates U.S. actions when different branches of the government interpret its meaning inconsistently.³

How Did the U.S. Get to This Point?

The current security context results from the geopolitical shifts in the past forty years, including the end of the Cold War, America's unipolar moment, and subsequent actions by Russia and China. After the Cold War, the United States emerged as the singular superpower in the 1990s. A prevailing belief in both U.S. policy circles and academia was that promoting democratic reforms and economic prosperity for former adversaries—such as Russia, its satellites, and former Warsaw Pact states and Soviet republics—would render future conflicts unlikely. This logic extended to a rising China: as it integrated further into the international system of liberal economic and diplomatic norms, the forces of democratic reforms would naturally transition and align China's behavior, transforming it into a responsible member of the international order.⁴ Critics often summarize this optimistic worldview with the phrase “end of history,” an allusion to Francis Fukuyama's book *The End of History and the Last Man*.⁵

This thinking permeated U.S. strategic thought as recently as the Obama administration, which stated in its national security strategy, “The United States welcomes the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous China.”⁶ The United States and its allies equated “winning” the Cold War with a strategic approach for the future. The collective West believed that their victory would naturally lead to an era of prosperity and, subsequently, peace.⁷

However, various forces and events have created a very different security environment for the United States. First, American adversaries did not interpret the end of the Cold War similarly. They viewed the forces of liberal democracy

³ Winkler, “Strategic Competition and US-China Relations,” 334-335.

⁴ Congressional Research Service, *Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense – Issues for Congress*, R43838 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, May 16, 2023), 1 and Appendix A, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43838/95>; Donald Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, December 2017), 26, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

⁵ See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, NY: Maxwell Macmillan, 1992). The phrase from the book title “the end of history ...” became representative of the 1990's concept that theories touting liberal democracy represented the dominant reality in international relations. This strain of thought heavily influence U.S. strategic thought while it was the single superpower after the end of the Cold War and is referenced in current strategic competition strategies.

⁶ Obama, *National Security Strategy*, 24.

⁷ Joseph R. Biden, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, October 2022), 8, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>; Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 26.

in the opposite manner – as threats to their regimes and control. Second, in the aftermath of its Cold War victory, the United States failed to establish a new strategy to safeguard its hard-won success. This lack of focus led to a haphazard approach to security, assuming that former adversaries would embrace liberal democracy and align with U.S. interests, even as those same adversaries sought ways to gain relative advantages. Third, following 9/11, the United States became engrossed in conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, committing to long-term counterinsurgency operations and nation-building efforts – both resource- and time-intensive endeavors.⁸

What's in a Name?

Recent American national strategies clearly articulate why strategic competition is necessary, and different administrations align in their terminology. Biden's national security strategy states this clearly in the President's introduction: "We are in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order."⁹ While Trump's national security strategy introduction is framed around the idea of "America First," it similarly asserts that America's strength will bring advantages, leading to a "better future" and a "balance of power that favors the United States, [its] allies, and [its] partners."¹⁰ The United States uses strategic competition to reframe its strategic thinking from the post-Cold War era to a new construct with an old name, emphasizing that understanding and engaging in strategic competition is imperative for the nation's future.

In the current era, the terms "great power competition" and "strategic competition" re-emerged in U.S. strategic dialogue during the Trump and Biden administrations, respectively. Originally from the Cold War, these terms have become central to both administrations' strategies concerning goals, objectives, and priorities.¹¹ They form the lexicon used by U.S. government entities to justify their strategic actions, including but not limited to strategies, plans, priorities, and funding decisions.¹² However, neither administration provided a clear definition of these terms, leading to varied interpretations of what they mean. This lack of clarity manifests in slightly different approaches to addressing the problem, making it critical to understand how the United States perceives and implements strategic competition.¹³

⁸ Congressional Research Service, *Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense*, 1 and Appendix A, 38.

⁹ Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 2.

¹⁰ Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, ii.

¹¹ Winkler, "Strategic Competition and US-China Relations," 345, 249-350.

¹² Alexander Boroff, "What Is Great-Power Competition, Anyway?" *Modern War Institute at West Point*, April 17, 2020, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/great-power-competition-anyway/>.

¹³ Cornell Overfield, "Biden's 'Strategic Competition' Is a Step Back," *Foreign Policy*, October 13, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/13/biden-strategic-competition-national-defense-strategy/>.

Why Does American Perception Matter?

U.S. leaders and strategies have framed current geopolitical competition in ideological terms – democracy versus authoritarianism and a rules-based order versus revisionism and revanchism. This language positions the United States and its allies as defenders of the status quo, committed to preserving the existing world order while portraying China and Russia as revisionist powers seeking to subsume or reshape it.¹⁴ Even under the “America First” framework, the Trump administration characterized these “challenges” as contests between democratic and autocratic values.¹⁵ This ideological framing is crucial to understanding the American construct of strategic competition and its potential impact: by emphasizing the ideological component, the United States has positioned itself as the status quo power, championing liberal democracy and its values – a goal of significant importance.

Why Does America Perceive It This Way?

In the strategies of both the Trump and Biden administrations, the language reflects goals aimed at garnering allies and partners to uphold the rules-based international order. This is crucial for preserving the advantages the United States has enjoyed since the end of World War II and for maintaining its position of power relative to its rising competitors, particularly China. This emphasis on strategic competition mirrors a scholarly theme that situates the United States within the framework of the Thucydides Trap. In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides describes how war between Sparta and Athens became “inevitable” as the rising power of Athens threatened Sparta’s status quo advantage. This dynamic, he argues, traps both states in a cycle that leads to conflict.¹⁶ Understanding this mental model is essential for grasping how the United States perceives and approaches strategic competition, especially concerning China.

Why is this important? Academia often describes the Thucydides Trap as a likely progression toward conflict and war following an extended period of intense and contentious competition. Graham Allison provides the most notable exploration of this perspective in his aptly-titled 2017 book *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* In it, Allison examines the dynamics of the Thucydides Trap by analyzing historical patterns from sixteen sim-

¹⁴ Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 3, 7-9.

¹⁵ Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 3.

¹⁶ Thucydides, Robert B. Strassler, and Richard Crawley, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, 1st Touchstone ed. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998). In my experience, this book edition of Thucydides history is the one most commonly used in U.S. military professional military education.

ilar scenarios, highlighting how the circumstances between the United States and China mirror or parallel these classic examples.¹⁷

Shortly after the Cold War ended, some scholars began issuing warnings through this lens. For instance, in his 1995 book, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*, Donald Kagan warned that the optimistic declarations about the end of war and conflict were premature. While not directly naming Russia or China, Kagan argued that competition between states is natural and inevitable and that the United States should remain vigilant and prepared for this reality. At a time when many scholars were celebrating the triumph of international liberalism, Kagan's cautionary perspective underscored the importance of learning from history – urging Western democracies to preserve peace by being ready for conflict.¹⁸

The scholarship paradigm suggests that miscalculation could lead to conflict. In the United States, similar academic and conceptual rhetoric appears in national strategies, although there is no universally accepted American definition of “strategic competition” and what it entails. Hal Brands highlighted this tension in 2022, framing the competition between the United States and Russia and China in Thucydides' terms. He warned that this competition becomes particularly dangerous during the “twilight” period – a transitional phase where conflict is more likely as powers vie for advantage. In such a period, miscalculations stemming from imprecise understanding could easily spark a war.¹⁹ Therefore, the ideological goals behind America's current strategy—strategic competition—introduce inherent points of friction that heighten these risks.

What Are America's Goals in Strategic Competition?

Maintain the Rules-Based International Order

In the context of strategic competition, the United States aims to maintain the rules-based international order that has benefited America and its allies since the end of World War II. The current U.S. national security strategy emphasizes that this international order, as defined and protected by the United States, provides stability and prosperity not only for the United States but for all nations. It states:

Our goal is clear – we want a free, open, prosperous, and secure international order. We seek an order that is free in that it allows people to enjoy their basic, universal rights and freedoms. It is open in that it provides all nations

¹⁷ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017). Authors like Hal Brands, Eliot Cohen, Donald Kagan, Robert Kagan, Paul Kennedy, Walter Russell Mead, and Donald Stoker have used or alluded to the status quo versus rising power construct in their scholarship.

¹⁸ Donald Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1995), 1-5.

¹⁹ Hal Brands, *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us About Great-Power Rivalry Today* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022), 1-9.

that sign up to these principles an opportunity to participate in, and have a role in shaping, the rules. It is prosperous in that it empowers all nations to continually raise the standard of living for their citizens. And secure, in that it is free from aggression, coercion and intimidation.²⁰

This international order has provided significant advantages for the United States, its allies, and partners over the past 80 years. However, a comparison of the Obama and Biden administrations' strategies reveals how strategic competition has shifted the focus and goals of American diplomacy, steering the U.S. inward. In Obama's strategy, the emphasis was evident in the title: "International Order,"²¹ reflecting a broad commitment to global stability. In contrast, Biden's strategy, with its title "Using Diplomacy to Build the Strongest Possible Coalitions," reflects a different focus and priority. While the current strategy still lists the international order as a vital interest, its approach centers on building coalitions and relationships to sustain the rules-based international order rather than maintaining the order itself as the primary goal.²² Again, this distinction is striking; two presidents with ostensibly similar philosophical approaches have prioritized American diplomacy in very different ways. This shift reflects a broader cognitive transition from the philosophies that shaped the post-Cold War era to strategic competition as the central organizing concept for national security today. This transformation in diplomatic focus is significant. U.S. diplomacy and the global order rely on American military and economic power, which are now on relative decline compared to China's rising influence and Russia's disruptive actions.²³ These shifts in state priorities and actions align with the dynamics described in the Thucydides Trap paradigm.

Sustaining U.S. Economic Primacy Through Economic Resiliency

The American economy remains the largest and most powerful in the world, representing the nation's greatest strength. However, U.S. strategic goals related to economic capabilities and capacity have shifted with the transition to strategic competition. While Trump's "America First" philosophy marked a significant change in economic focus, this shift is best illustrated in the differences between the Obama and Biden strategies – two Democratic presidents who previously served closely together as President and Vice President. While the Obama strategy was the first to hint at strategic competition, its economic priorities centered on global trade aligned with liberal democratic values and the maintenance of a free global economy supported by the rules-based international order.²⁴ In contrast, Biden's strategy for economic prosperity bears more resemblance to

²⁰ Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 10-11.

²¹ Obama, *National Security Strategy*, 23.

²² Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 16.

²³ Christopher Preble, "A Credible Grand Strategy: The Urgent Need to Set Priorities," Stimson Report (Washington, D.C.: The Stimson Center, January 2024), 5, www.stimson.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Grand-Strategy-Report-WEB.pdf.

²⁴ Obama, *National Security Strategy*, 15.

Trump's approach than to Obama's. It focuses on strengthening "national power" by enhancing domestic economic capabilities, such as workforce, technological innovation, and manufacturing, to ensure American security through economic resilience.²⁵ This shift is further reflected in the U.S. Department of Commerce's current strategy, which centers on three key principles – innovation, equity, and resilience. Its five main goals predominantly focus on strengthening the U.S. economy rather than promoting global economic integration.²⁶ This is a change that illustrates the United States' new focus on strategic competition. It represents a departure from the post-Cold War belief that integrating rising powers like China into a global economy would eventually transform them into liberal democracies, compliant with the international order as the United States envisions it.

Preserving U.S. Primacy

The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) was the first strategic document to explicitly use the term "strategic competition" and designate it as the "primary concern" of the United States and, by extension, the U.S. military. This marked a significant shift for the Department of Defense (DoD) from strategies focused on combating terrorism and regional adversaries like Iran and North Korea to a clear recognition that the United States was in competition with such powers as Russia and China. Reflecting its strategic culture, the U.S. military invested considerable time and effort in defining "strategic competition." After its introduction in the 2018 NDS, the DoD released its *Joint Concept for Competing* in 2023, defining strategic competition as "a persistent and long-term struggle that occurs between two or more adversaries seeking to pursue incompatible interests without necessarily engaging in armed conflict with each other."²⁷ Notably, the military remains the only department to formally define strategic competition and incorporate it into its strategy and planning. Other departments—such as those responsible for diplomacy, development, and commerce—do not use the term despite its role as the organizing construct for the national security strategy. This raises a critical question: How can the United States effectively coordinate and

²⁵ Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 14-15.

²⁶ See Gina Raimondo, U.S. Secretary of Commerce, "Innovation, Equity, and Resilience: Strengthening American Competitiveness in the 21st Century," U.S. Department of Commerce Strategic Plan 2022-2026 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2022), www.commerce.gov/sites/default/files/2022-03/DOC-Strategic-Plan-2022%E2%80%932026.pdf.

²⁷ "Joint Concept for Competing," Joint Chiefs of Staff, February 10, 2023, <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/23698400/20230213-joint-concept-for-competing-signed.pdf>, iii; "Pentagon's Joint Concept for Competing," U.S. Naval Institute, March 9, 2023, <https://news.usni.org/2023/03/09/pentagons-joint-concept-for-competing>; Mark Pomerleau, "Pentagon Publishes New 'Joint Concept for Competing,' Warning That Adversaries Aim to 'Win Without Fighting,'" *DefenseScoop*, March 7, 2023, <https://defensescoop.com/2023/03/07/pentagon-publishes-new-joint-concept-for-competing-warning-that-adversaries-aim-to-win-without-fighting/>.

utilize its elements of national power if different departments do not share a common understanding of this key concept?

The primary internal challenge to U.S. military power in strategic competition lies in setting priorities. As outlined earlier, since the end of the Cold War, U.S. primacy and the absence of true competitors allowed the United States to engage in conflicts across the globe, from the Balkans to the Middle East to the Philippines. Following the events of 9/11, the United States maintained global military engagements while committing most of its military force to the prolonged conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the U.S. military capabilities that provided advantages during and after the Cold War—such as force deployment, global posture, and advanced technology—are now being challenged or denied by adversaries like China, Russia, and regional malign actors such as Iran and North Korea. China and Russia, recognizing America’s distractions, have spent years developing military capabilities and strategic doctrines specifically designed to undermine U.S. strengths and prevent the effective use of its military power.²⁸ This legacy of unchallenged primacy, coupled with competitors’ efforts to neutralize U.S. military advantages, presents a significant dilemma. The U.S. military is transitioning from a posture where it acts with near impunity and overwhelming strength anywhere in the world to one where it must navigate competition with adversaries under the threshold of war, particularly in contested spaces and global commons.

America’s View of Its Competitors

As previously discussed, the United States has framed strategic competition as a renewal of ideological rivalry and a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism. It explicitly identifies China as the primary threat, with Russia—and, to a lesser extent, regional actors like Iran and North Korea—considered “acute” threats that require careful balancing. According to the United States, allowing these states to achieve their strategic objectives and gain advantages would undermine the liberal democratic international order, posing an existential threat to the values and stability upheld by the United States and its allies.²⁹

Has Anything Changed? And Why Does It Matter?

Since strategic competition became the primary security construct in American strategy, the overarching goals and interests have remained consistent. First and foremost, American strategies have long regarded U.S. primacy as critical to both national and global stability and prosperity. The key change, however, has been the explicit identification of China as the “pacing” threat, i.e., the rising power. This status quo versus rising power dynamic is clearly evident and central to the Thucydides Trap narrative that underpins American strategy.

²⁸ Congressional Research Service, *Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense*.

²⁹ Established in the President’s introduction; Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 2-3.

China: the “Pacing” Threat

China represents the United States’ primary concern in strategic competition and is the main driver behind the shift in the American strategic approach.³⁰ As already outlined, after the Cold War, U.S. strategy was based on the assumption that China would reform, transitioning towards a more democratic government and aligning its behavior with global norms as it benefited from growing economic, diplomatic, and cultural ties with the United States and the global West. Instead, China leveraged these opportunities to do the opposite: the Chinese Communist Party consolidated its autocratic regime while simultaneously fueling its economic growth and expanding its military power.³¹

As the primary competitor, China occupies a central place in American strategic thought. The strategies of the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations all identify China as the “pacing” threat – a new term indicating that U.S. competitive actions must be able to match or surpass China’s actions. However, the term “pacing” is problematic, as it connotes the idea of a linear competition between powers, akin to a race where the status quo seeks to prevent the rise of its competitor. This perspective is inherently American and overlooks the asymmetric actions and varied approaches that nations often employ within the broader international relations system.³²

These conditions make the Thucydides Trap paradigm a significant dilemma for American leaders. As discussed earlier, this competition between a status quo power and a rising challenger creates heightened tension and increases the potential for miscalculation. Additionally, the actions of allies or hedging states could inadvertently draw either country into conflict. Ironically, by explicitly designating China as the clear threat and framing strategic competition as an end in itself with respect to China, the United States increases the risk of conflict despite its strategy aiming to avoid it.³³

Russia’s Role as Spoiler

U.S. strategic documents state that Russia threatens international stability and emphasize that American allies and partners, who uphold faith in international agreements like the NATO alliance, are the means to address this “immediate

³⁰ Winkler, “Strategic Competition and US-China Relations,” 345.

³¹ Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, “The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/china-reckoning>.

³² Richard Ned Lebow, “Reason, Cause, and Cultural Arrogance,” *E-International Relations*, April 11, 2023, <https://www.e-ir.info/2023/04/11/reason-cause-and-cultural-arrogance/>. Lebow presents an interesting argument that international relations theory are based on Western reason and concepts and therefore do not address approaches from other cultures. This idea is often discussed in military strategic discussions, but this was the first time I had seen the potentially intellectual unpinning versus platitudes that other cultures are “different.”

³³ Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 24-25.

and persistent threat.”³⁴ While successive American strategies have identified China as the primary threat, Russia continues to garner significant attention due to the war in Ukraine, its interventions in “near abroad,” and its persistent use of political warfare—such as cyber-attacks and disinformation—to destabilize adversaries. Notably, the Biden administration’s strategy highlights the importance of “out-competing China and constraining Russia.”³⁵ While American leaders prioritize competition with China, they are continually forced to address the immediate threats posed by Russian actions, which are more blatant violations of the international order and acutely threaten allies and partners in Europe. This forces a diversion of resources, personnel, and effort that the U.S. government would prefer to direct toward countering China. This prioritization challenge was highlighted in the section on military means. For example, the current American strategy aims to “integrate our alliances in the Indo-Pacific and Europe.” The focus of this section is on how one region affects the other. However, it dedicates only one sentence to the role of Indo-Pacific allies in Europe against Russian aggression, while the remaining examples emphasize European allies and partners in Africa and South America helping to counter Chinese actions, particularly in the Taiwan Strait. In the context of the Thucydides Trap paradigm, Russia represents an acute threat that creates dilemmas for both the United States and China. It remains to be seen whether the American approach to strategic competition, with its emphasis on China, will effectively address the distinct threat that Russia poses to the rules-based international order.

How does America Compete?

The United States competes using three main capabilities: its networks of alliances and relationships, its economy, and its military. The current strategy reiterates these capabilities under the heading “Investing in Our Strength.” However, the Biden administration’s national strategy is not the first strategic document to highlight these critical means. American competitiveness lies in its commitment to international liberal institutions that promote democratic values, open economies, and conflict resolution through arbitration. In the context of strategic competition, however, these commitments may be viewed as luxuries, given that U.S. military power, coupled with economic might, has supported these concepts since the end of World War II. The United States’ ability to sustain these commitments is at the heart of its competition with China and Russia.

American Primacy – a Blessing and a Curse

The U.S. role in the Cold War and the strategic confusion that followed its end have created challenges for American focus. The “return” to strategic competition has helped the United States articulate threats to its primacy, but its strate-

³⁴ Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 17, 25-26.

³⁵ Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 23.

gic approach over the last forty years has fostered an expectation—both domestically and abroad—that America will respond to all threats, from regional revisionist powers like Iran and North Korea to transnational issues such as human rights, climate change, extremism, and food insecurity.³⁶

The Biden National Security Strategy asserts that the United States must and will respond, but it also hedges, viewing these issues as areas where even competitors can agree and cooperate.³⁷ In contrast, the Trump National Security Strategy argued that engaging and including rivals undermines American strategy and clearly misinterprets our adversaries' intentions. The Trump strategy made it clear that while the United States must engage its rivals, it should do so with the understanding that everything is part of that rivalry.³⁸ This difference represents a fault line in how different parts of the American polity view strategy and foreign policy, revealing a weakness in the U.S. approach to strategic competition.

Also, allies and partners represent both an opportunity and a challenge for the United States. Washington views its alliances and agreements, such as NATO, as key strategic advantages. American military strength, force projection capabilities, advanced technology, and economic power underpin these relationships, creating a coalition of like-minded states that acts as a powerful deterrent and counterbalance to the rising influence of China and the disruptive goals of Russia, Iran, and North Korea.³⁹ However, maintaining these alliances also introduces challenges. As noted earlier, the U.S.'s inconsistent strategic approach prior to embracing strategic competition created expectations that the United States would respond to any crisis, regardless of its strategic importance. Domestically, this has rekindled more traditional American skepticism toward foreign entanglements and may lead to a new prioritization framework, as foreshadowed by the Trump strategy. The Thucydides Trap paradigm predicts that the United States is more likely to react to crises for allies, no matter the importance to American priorities, driven by the perception that losing an ally or partner is more consequential than spending resources on lower-priority issues.⁴⁰ Balancing these commitments presents one of the Thucydides fault lines, where miscalculation is more likely.

Conclusion

The use of strategic competition in U.S. national strategies reflects a pivotal recognition of the evolving global landscape, particularly the threats posed by

³⁶ Stephen Wertheim, "Why America Can't Have It All: Washington Must Choose Between Primacy and Prioritizing," *Foreign Affairs*, February 14, 2024, www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/why-america-cant-have-it-all.

³⁷ Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 6.

³⁸ Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 3.

³⁹ Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 16-19.

⁴⁰ Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*

China, Russia, and other revanchist states. Emerging from the post-Cold War era, the United States enjoyed a period of unchallenged supremacy, buoyed by optimistic expectations of a harmonious, liberal world order. However, the realities of geopolitics have proven far more complex, with rising powers like China and resurgent actors like Russia fundamentally challenging this narrative. The term “strategic competition” encapsulates the imperative for the United States to reassess its approach, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of contemporary threats and the need to adapt to a more dynamic and contested environment. Crucially, this paradigm underscores the importance of maintaining American primacy in shaping the international order, recognizing both the opportunities and challenges posed by allies and adversaries alike. However, framing strategic competition as an end in itself risks reinforcing constructs like the Thucydides Trap, potentially increasing the likelihood of conflict and miscalculation.

As the United States navigates this new era of competition, it must strategically leverage diplomacy, economic strength, and military capabilities in concert with its network of allies to safeguard its interests and uphold the principles of a free, open, and secure international order. Failure to do so risks not only the erosion of American leadership but also the destabilization of the global landscape. This underscores the critical importance of strategic foresight and resilience in addressing evolving challenges.

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The Atlanticist Anglo-Saxon Reich and All That: How Russia Understands Strategic Confrontation

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Abstract: Utilizing the British Broadcasting Corporation Monitoring (BBCM) service to track and analyze the use of the term “Anglo-Saxons” by Russian officials, media representatives, state policy documents, as well as wider advocates of Russia’s narrative, this article surveys how Putin’s regime references it. The term’s meanings are open-ended, dynamic, and evolving, and its applications tend to be context-sensitive. “Anglo-Saxons” functions as an epithet, trope, synonym, metaphor, and analogy in contemporary Russian discourse during Putin’s fifth term. It represents a “collective West” perceived as intent on destabilizing Russia. The supposed threat of “Anglo-Saxons” is used to justify political choices, legitimize internal order, characterize Russia’s alternative geopolitical identity, and outline its vision of a preferred global order. Following a genealogy of the term, tracing its evolving meanings through the medieval, early modern, and modern periods, the article identifies three core ways in which official discourse deploys the “Anglo-Saxon” concept: 1) “Anglo-Saxon Atlanticists” and the “collective West”; 2) the “Anglo-Saxon Reich” – portraying the “fascist Anglo-Saxons elite” and “Ordinary Nazis”; and 3) “Anglo-Saxons” as “Fifth Column” and “Foreign Agent.” Finally, the article concludes by exploring the trajectory of “Anglo-Saxon” usage and reflecting on its efficacy in legitimizing current Russian policies and strategies.

Keywords: Anglo-Saxons, collective West, fascist, Nazis, fifth column, foreign agent, Russia, Ukraine, Central Asia, foreign policy, ideologue.

Introduction

President Putin's Russia professes to understand strategic confrontation in terms of a struggle over the structure of the international system. The current unipolar system, as he characterized it in his 2007 Munich Security Conference speech, poses an existential threat to Russia's identity, sovereignty, and statehood: "They tried to force Russia to give up its sovereignty, identity, culture, independent foreign and domestic policy. We have no right to agree with such an approach."¹ The West, in the form of the "Anglo-Saxons" (Англосаксы/*Anglosaksy*) and the "Anglo-Saxon world," eternally encircles and contains Russia, driven by greed for Russia's hydrocarbon wealth, jealousy of Russia's moral dignity, and fear of its military might. Nikolai Patrushev, head of Russia's Security Council, asserts that the "Anglo-Saxon world" wages a permanent war against Russia: "The United States, NATO, and their satellites are using Kyiv's Nazi regime and various kinds of mercenaries to wage a proxy war against our people and country, a war that the Anglo-Saxon world will not stop even with the end of active hostilities in the conflict in Ukraine."² A central premise is that Russia's own independence has become the major obstacle to the perpetuation of the current unfair unipolar rules-based pernicious colonial "Anglo-Saxon" order. Alexey Drobinin, Director of the Foreign Policy Planning Department in Russia's Foreign Ministry, states: "But for now, we are watching Anglo-Saxons—or rather, their ruling elites'—attempt to restore the 'unipolar moment' of the early 1990s by force. To achieve this, they are pushing to dismember civilizational commonwealths into segments suitable to be absorbed, in line with the 'divide and rule' maxim."³

According to this self-understanding, a strong, strategically autonomous Russia is mankind's last and best hope for a future fair and just multipolar, multilateral, post-colonial, liberated order. As Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted in February 2023 before the *State Duma*, those "who imagine themselves the masters of the destinies of people ... are trying to interfere with our efforts by pushing us back decades and even to ruin our national development under the slogans of 'decolonization' and 'preparations for Russia's collapse.' In the process, the Anglo-Saxons and the rest of the collective West that have obeyed them without a murmur are doing all they can to impose their diktat in world

¹ Ivan Egorov interview with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev headlined "The Liar in the Rye": Ivan Egorov, "Patrushev: The West Has Created an Empire of Lies That Presupposes the Destruction of Russia," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, April 26, 2022, <https://rg.ru/2022/04/26/patrushev-zapad-sozdal-imperiiu-lzhi-predpola-gaiushchuiu-unichtozhenie-rossii.html>. – in Russian

² "Patrushev: The West Won't Stop Its Proxy War Against Russia Even After the 'Hot Phase' in Ukraine," *TASS News Agency*, January 29, 2024, <https://tass.ru/politika/19844097>. – in Russian

³ Alexey Drobinin, "The Vision of a Multipolar World: The Civilizational Factor and Russia's Place in the Emerging World Order," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Opinions, February 20, 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-vision-of-a-multipolar-world/>.

affairs. They are doing this to continue controlling the external conditions for the development of all humanity solely for the sake of their own global domination. They resort to illegal methods, including threats, blackmail, and outright robbery, to punish those pursuing an independent, national-oriented foreign policy.”⁴

This construction appears to legitimize President Putin’s forever rule, a limited-access order regime, Russia’s justification for its full-scale, multi-axis attack on Ukraine, the imposition of Russia’s will on neighboring countries within its self-declared sphere of influence (“historic Russian lands”), and normalizes Russia’s voice and veto in and over global hot spots. Russia self-characterizes its imperial war of aggression in Ukraine as a “Special Military Operation” (SVO), not a war. It suggests that Russia’s victory will serve as a catalyst that will accelerate a move from unjust (“Anglo-Saxon colonialism”) unipolarity, “Anglo-Saxon” hegemony, and decadent globalist universal values (“liberal totalitarianism” and “militant liberalism”) toward “fair multipolarity.” Putin posits that the first battle in the struggle for global order is a fight against “Anglo-Saxon” masters in “neo-Nazi Ukraine”: “The Ukrainian crisis is not a territorial conflict. The issue is broader and more fundamental – we are talking about the principles the new world order will be based upon.”⁵

In this view, Russia is portrayed as an anti-global, anti-colonial leader rallying the world’s “oppressed countries” to “restore historical justice.” As Lavrov asserted: “Western geopolitical engineers are directly provoking crises in various parts of the world. They are following the concept of controlled chaos in order to fish in troubled waters,” and “The global Anglo-Saxon world is looking for opportunities to exclude the peoples of Russia from the system of world distribution of resources.”⁶ Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova accuses NATO of having chosen Russia as the primary target of its aggressive policy and of using Ukraine as an instrument: “The Anglo-Saxons, under the pretext of confronting the USSR, and essentially with the goal of maintaining the hegemony

⁴ “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Remarks and Answers to Questions During the Government Hour in the State Duma of the Russian Federation, Moscow, February 15, 2023,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Website*, Moscow, February 15, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/press_service/photos/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/1854365/.

⁵ Text of report “Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, October 19, 2017,” *President of the Russian Federation Website*, October 19, 2017, www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/statements/55882.

⁶ Text of “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Remarks at the 11th Moscow Conference on International Security, Moscow, August 15, 2023,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Website*, August 15, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/press_service/photos/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/1900527/; Sergei V. Lavrov, “Genuine Multilateralism and Diplomacy vs the ‘Rules-Based Order’,” *Russia in Global Affairs* 21, no. 3 (July/September 2003): 104-113, <https://doi.org/10.31278/1810-6374-2023-21-3-104-113>.

of the West under American leadership, continues to be an instrument to ensure the interests of primarily the United States, aggressive and destructive forces.”⁷

Russian military commentator Igor Korotchenko, on Rossiya 1’s *60 Minut* political talk show, stated: “In general, I believe it’s necessary to create a new geopolitical alliance of the global south against the U.S., Anglo-Saxons, and NATO. That is absolutely justified.”⁸ according to this view, Russia then acts as a moderator in this post-“Anglo-Saxon” rules-free order, with its unique “state-civilization” status enabling it to function as a global stabilizer, maintaining the global balance of power.⁹ More specifically, Lt Gen (ret) Andrey Gurulyov stated that Xi Jinping’s peace plan for Ukraine was not about Ukraine, “It is about the fight against the domination of Anglo-Saxon fascism [...] and about the fight against neo-colonial policies of the West.”¹⁰ On 26 and 27 February 2024, Moscow hosted the “Forum of Multipolarity” and the second congress of the “International Russophile Movement,” respectively. Both events focused, according to Zakharova, on the struggle for a just world without the hegemony of the “collective West.”¹¹

For Russia, the inevitability (as Lavrov describes it, an “unstoppable process”) of multipolarity guarantees that US attempts to consolidate its hegemony will fail and that Russia will emerge as a key center of global power – a pole capable of acting as both a rule-shaper and a rule-breaker, exercising an order-producing and managerial role within its sphere of influence.¹² Russia understands that few states in the international system possess real “sovereignty” or “strategic autonomy” – the ability to pursue their own independent foreign policy. All other states are “vassals,” “clients,” and “proxies” of these “civilizational-states.” As “civilizational-states” enjoy super-sovereignty, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all other states are, by definition, limited, with “state-civilizations” deciding the limits. To illustrate, President Putin publicly adopts a tortured logic, claiming that Russia’s SVO will restore Ukraine’s “true sovereignty” when

⁷ “Zakharova Accuses NATO of Using Ukraine as an Anti-Russian Instrument,” *TASS News Agency*, Moscow, April 4, 2024, <https://tass.ru/politika/20441313>. – in Russian

⁸ “Russian Talk Shows: Ukraine Said to Have ‘No Chance of Success’ on Battlefield,” *BBC Monitoring*, Round-up, April 20, 2023.

⁹ Drobinin, “The Vision of a Multipolar World”; Andrey Pertsev, “Putin, the anti-colonialist The Kremlin’s new model of Russian ‘soft power’ will fuel anti-Western resentment in Southern Europe, South America, Africa, and Asia,” *Meduza*, November 11, 2022, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/11/11/putin-the-anti-colonialist>.

¹⁰ “Russian TV Show Defends Plans to Deploy Nukes in Belarus,” *BBC Monitoring*, Report, Rossiya 1 TV, Moscow, March 26, 2023. – in Russian

¹¹ Aleksandr Gasyuk, “Russophiles and Multipolar Fighters from All Over the World Gathered in Moscow,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, February 26, 2024, <https://rg.ru/2024/02/26/rusofily-i-borcy-za-mnogopoliarnost-so-vsego-mira-sobralis-v-moskve.html>. – in Russian

¹² “Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s Article for Russia in Global Affairs Magazine, 5 May 2023,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Website*, May 5, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1867330/.

Ukraine merges its people and territory with Russia in a process of “reunification.”

Utilizing the British Broadcasting Corporation Monitoring (BBCM) service to track and survey the use of the term “Anglo-Saxons” by Russian officials, media representatives, state policy documents, and wider advocates of Russia’s narrative, this article examines how Putin’s regime references the notion of “Anglo-Saxons.” It argues that “Anglo-Saxons” became a trope during Putin’s fourth presidential term, symbolizing a malign “collective West” intent on destabilizing Russia. The supposed threat posed by the “Anglo-Saxons” is used to necessitate political choices, legitimize internal order, characterize Russia’s alternative geopolitical identity, and present a vision of its preferred global order. After offering a genealogy of the term, highlighting its evolving understandings in the medieval, early modern, and modern periods, the article identifies three core ways in which official discourse deploys the “Anglo-Saxon” concept: 1) “Anglo-Saxon Atlanticists” and the “collective West”; 2) the “Anglo-Saxon Reich” – “fascist Anglo-Saxons elite” and “Ordinary Nazis”; and, 3) “Anglo-Saxons” as “Fifth Column” and “Foreign Agent.” Finally, the article draws conclusions about the trajectory of “Anglo-Saxon” usage and offers reflections on its effectiveness in legitimizing current Russian policies and strategies.

Genealogy: Genesis and Lineage

The earliest usage of the term “Anglo-Saxons” refers to historical tribes that occupied Britain after the fall of the Roman Empire and the Roman retreat in the 5th century AD. Germanic tribes, the Angles and the Saxons (from the North German plains), invaded the Roman province of Britannia as the Roman legions withdrew. They overcame the Roman “forts of the Saxon shore,” bringing with them their culture and language and assimilating the native Celtic Britons. A mosaic of tribal kingdoms, each with its own dialects and linguistic traditions, existed until the 11th century when King Harold was defeated at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 by William the Conqueror. After the Norman invasion, the subsequent narratives of a “Norman Yoke” (similar to the “Mongol Yoke” in Russian historiography) were accompanied by the notion of an “Anglo-Norman” order. In short, “Anglo-Saxons” are today in Britain associated with heroic myths and legends, such as “Beowulf” and “King Arthur and the Round Table,” lost in the Dark Ages (early medieval history).

Beyond early medieval history, the phrase “Anglo-Saxon” in Western thinking evolved in the early modern and modern periods to become synonymous with an offshore European or transatlantic development model. This model, which gained prominence in the 1980s, championed neoliberal ideals, free-market principles, and privatization. It was underpinned by a Protestant-Calvinistic work ethic, progress, and a legal system based on statutes and precedents. In contrast, the continental Franco-German model, often referred to as “Rhineland capitalism,” was characterized by generous welfare services, a stronger emphasis on social justice, and a more significant role for the government in the economy,

with jurisprudence grounded in Roman law. In this context, the “Anglo-Saxon” variant represents a maritime, naval power, as opposed to a land-based military power.

Tracking BBCM references, the first media outlets to use the term “Anglo-Saxons” were the Iranian Persian language press in the early 2010s, which highlighted the role of the “Anglo-Saxons” in pushing forward sanctions against Iran’s nuclear program. At this time, there were no references to “Anglo-Saxons” in the Russian political discourse. The first Russian government and pro-Kremlin, state-controlled media references began to appear around 2018, drawing a distinction between the Slavic Eurasian civilizational world of Russia and that of Western Europe. Since then, and especially in the lead-up to Russia’s full-scale multi-axis attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Putin and his circle have referred to the “collective West” and “Anglo-Saxons” with increasing frequency. In Russia, the phrase “Anglo-Saxons” is not used as a synonym for a particular Western development model but rather to reference a U.S.-centric world order paradigm. The United States is seen as its global leader, the United Kingdom plays a supporting role as the main U.S. ally, while continental Europe plays a passive role.¹³ “Anglo-Saxon” is also used within this paradigm to characterize conspiracy, encirclement, and threat. Two years into the full-scale attack, the derogatory use of the term “Anglo-Saxons” increasingly appears in official speeches and media reports, and state institutions have popularized its usage. In 2023, for example, the Russian Ministry of Culture approved a list of priority topics eligible for state support in film production, including the “popularization of heroism” during the war in Ukraine, the “degradation of Europe,” the “neocolonial policy of the countries of the Anglo-Saxon world,” and the “formation of a multipolar world.”¹⁴

The foundations of a worldview populated by “Anglo-Saxon” enemies were laid in the early 2000s. Nataliya Narochnitskaya, a nationalist historian and politician, produced scathing critiques of Russian “Westernizers” and Western notions of universal human rights. In her major work, *Russia and Russians in World History (Rossiya i russkie v mirovoi istorii)*, she advanced a theory of Russian civilization and positioned Russia as a “civilizational state.” She argued that the Cold War is best understood not as a struggle between totalitarianism and democracy but as a clash of civilizations waged by the West against “post-Byzantine space” for a millennium – beginning in 800 when Charlemagne was crowned emperor by the Pope. Russian Orthodox civilization, based on Orthodox spirituality and holistic-dialectal thinking, diverged from “Western Christianity,” which

¹³ Uliana Z. Artamonova, “‘Popcorn Diplomacy’: American Blockbusters and World Order,” *Russia in Global Affairs* 20, no. 2 (April/June 2022): 105-128, <https://doi.org/10.31278/1810-6374-2022-2-105-128>.

¹⁴ “Russian Films to Focus on “Anglo-Saxon Neocolonialism,” Promoting Army: The Russian Ministry of Culture Has Identified Priority Topics for State Support for Film Production in 2023,” *Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation Website*, Moscow, November 30, 2022. – in Russian

Narochnitskaya asserted was diminished by the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment, and concurrent traditions of humanism, secularism, and Aristotelian rationality. As Robert Horvath notes:

In Narochnitskaya's narrative, Russia's mortal enemies in the modern era were the "Anglo-Saxons," the English-speaking Atlantic democracies. What made the Anglo-Saxons so dangerous was their Puritan, Calvinist heritage, a heresy (*apostasiya*) that perverted their moral sensibility and guided their conduct on the world stage. The Calvinist doctrine of predestination, which reserved salvation for a divinely-chosen elect and condemned the rest to eternal damnation, fortified the Anglo-Saxons' contempt for alien civilizations and their indifference to the trail of imperial devastation left by their pacification of Ireland, North America, and India.¹⁵

Narochnitskaya's civilizational ideology was legitimized by Aleksandr Panarin, a professor at Moscow State University, and popularized by Aleksandr Dugin, an ultra-rightist publicist, theorist of multipolarity, and founder of the Eurasian movement, who views geopolitics in classical terms as a struggle between land-based continental powers like Russia and sea-based Anglo-Saxon oceanic powers. Her narrative is now representative of mainstream thinking in Russia. Leonid Slutsky, chairman of Russia's ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and a Russian presidential candidate in 2024, stated in 2021: "We must remember that the ideology of the Anglo-Saxons is, in essence, the ideology of an anti-Christian and therefore anti-human sect. It stands on the precepts of Calvinist Protestantism." He further noted: "The clearest confirmation of the inhumane, fascist nature of Calvinism was the reconquest of Ireland by the fanatical Protestant Oliver Cromwell."¹⁶

Alexander Shchipkov, a political philosopher, First Vice-Rector of the Russian Orthodox University, stated: "Russians are being forced to claim that Russia is the aggressor in Ukraine. In fact, it is known that Kyiv and the West were planning an attack on Donbas and Russian regions. Two dates are named – April 25 and March 8. Therefore, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief decided to launch a preemptive strike." The logic of this decision is obvious and was voiced by Vladimir Putin: "Russia has no right to repeat the mistake of 1941 and must act proactively." Without missing a beat, Shchipkov continues: "President Vladimir Putin did not call the West an empire of lies for the sake of a nice word. This is an extremely accurate definition of the essence of how the Anglo-Saxons work.

¹⁵ Robert Horvath, "The Reinvention of 'Traditional Values': Nataliya Narochnitskaya and Russia's Assault on Universal Human Rights," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 5 (2016): 868-892, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2016.1184230>.

¹⁶ Leonid Slutsky, "The Ideology of the Liberal Democratic Party of the 21st Century Is Anti-fascism," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, June 21, 2023, <https://rg.ru/2023/06/21/ideologiya-ldpr-xxi-veka-antifashizm.html>.

Informational truth, on the other hand, strategically works for the long term and wins.”¹⁷

For this narrative to work, Calvinism and Cromwell become the early modern ideational transmission belt that bridges early medieval Anglo-Saxon polities with the 21st century. However, this notional bridge cannot bear their ahistorical weight. Calvinist thinking did not dominate in the post-independence United States, where Thomas Jefferson ensured a separation, not a fusion, of Church and State. In Britain, a restoration of the Stuart dynasty followed Cromwell’s death, and with it, the Anglican Church became dominant in England and the Episcopalian Church in Scotland. The term “Anglo-Saxon” lost its meaning in the process.

As Ivan Timofeev notes, Russia’s current use of “Anglo-Saxons” overlooks several key historical facts. In the early 20th century, for example, “Great Britain seriously considered the scenario of a naval war against the United States. Within the United States itself, in 1861, a civil war broke out between two camps of “Anglo-Saxons,” which claimed more than half a million lives. In 1814, the British burned the White House and many other government buildings in Washington, and a few decades earlier, cultural and civilizational proximity did not help them keep 13 colonies obedient.”¹⁸ Even as a descriptor of the United States, the term is deficient. Indeed, the U.S. ambassador to Russia, Lynne Tracy, has argued that the term “Anglo-Saxons” used by the Kremlin to describe American and British leadership does not reflect reality. The United States, she points out, is “enriched” by immigrants and is a “multinational country where people from all over the world live.”¹⁹

Heritage: “Anglo-Saxons” Form and Function

In general, Russia’s political establishment and pro-Kremlin state-controlled media characterize the “Anglo-Saxons” as forming a powerful establishment that acts as instructors, overseers, masterminds, and controllers. These “Atlanticist Nazis” are depicted as the inheritors of Hitler’s ideology of racial, ethnic, cultural, and economic superiority. Just as Hitler sought to deprive Russia of its prospects for independent socio-economic and cultural-civilizational development, the new “Atlanticist Nazis” are seen as continuing that mission. Russia contends that the “Zelensky regime” operates “on instruction from its Anglo-Saxon overseers,”

¹⁷ Alexander Shchipkov, “Aggression Against Russia’s Intellect: Around the Special Operation in Ukraine There Is a Struggle Between Short-term Lies and Long-term Truth,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, May 30, 2022, https://www.ng.ru/kartblansh/2022-05-30/3_8448_kb.html.

¹⁸ Ivan N. Timofeev, “A State as Civilisation and Political Theory,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Valdai Papers, May 23, 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/a-state-as-civilisation/>.

¹⁹ “US Envoy Questions Russian Use of Term ‘Anglo-Saxons,’” *Vision Newspapers Online*, April 29, 2023, <https://visionnewspapers.com/us-envoy-questions-russian-use-of-term-anglo-saxons/>.

and that “Ukraine is in any case run by Anglo-Saxon masters.” Additionally, the Russian narrative asserts that “Anglo-Saxon colonizers cynically use other nations,” with the Estonian authorities described as “the conduits of the will of the Anglo-Saxon colonial power.” The “Anglo-Saxons” are also accused of holding a “monopoly on the global information streams,” allegedly controlling more than three-quarters of the world’s media, including social networks.

President Putin himself publicly justified his interview with American political commentator Tucker Carlson on February 8, 2024, precisely because Carlson was not part of the “traditional Anglo-Saxon media.”²⁰ Further reinforcing this narrative, FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov, in an address to the heads of the Russia-led CIS security services in Minsk, accused the United Kingdom and the United States of seeking to prolong the Ukraine war to preserve their “financial hegemony.” He stated: “The Anglo-Saxons’ design is obvious: to expand their capacity to influence the world’s key resources and transit regions, retain the hegemony of the transnational capital based in the U.S. and Great Britain, and camouflage their responsibility for the current global economic crisis.”²¹

Similarly, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Chernyshenko accused the “Anglo-Saxon” powers of orchestrating a conspiracy within the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to block Russian athletes from competing in international sports competitions: “We saw how, at the behest of the Anglo-Saxons, all international organizations, starting with the IOC, began to put obstacles for the participation of our athletes in international sports competitions, and they continue to do so.”²²

As Russia’s political and media discourse escalated in the lead-up to and after the February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the language used to describe “Anglo-Saxons” has become markedly more violent and extreme. In December 2021, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova described the “Anglo-Saxon tandem” as holding “cannibalistic views.”²³ By April 2022, “Anglo-Saxon

²⁰ Artem Efimov, Vitaly Vasilchenko, and Ilya Lyapin, “The Collective West: What Is Putin Really Talking about When He Rails against the West?” *Meduza*, February 20, 2024, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2024/02/20/the-collective-west>; Tucker Carlson, though, might more traditionally be thought as an exemplar of WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) elite in US (inherited wealth and of early colonial “Anglo-Saxon stock”).

²¹ “Russian FSB Chief Says US, UK Need Ukraine War for Financial ‘Hegemony,’” *TASS News Agency*, Moscow, June 1, 2023. – in Russian

²² Duncan Mackay, “Chernyshenko Blames Anglo-Saxon Countries for Russia’s International Sports Isolation,” *Inside the Games*, March 1, 2023, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1134298/chernyshenko-anglo-saxon-conspiracy>.

²³ Yevgeniy Verlin, “Cramped, but Not So Much. Or Not Even at All. Most Political Analysts Regarded the Conclusion about the Alliance between Moscow and Beijing as at Least Premature,” *Republic: Heartland*, December 16, 2021, <https://republic.ru/posts/102639>. – in Russian

respectability” is portrayed as a mere façade, masking “hatred, anger, and inhumanity.”²⁴ This concept of subterfuge and camouflage as a core element in “Anglo-Saxon” diplomacy is further expressed through the term “diarrhoeal demagoguery”: “In place of diplomacy, the Anglo-Saxons are distinctively substituting coercion, subordination, intervention. For now, they still cover it up with a huge number of increasingly depreciating words – playing at democracy.”²⁵

Dmitry Medvedev, Russia’s Deputy Head of the Security Council, also employed this metaphor, intensifying its usage. In September 2022, Medvedev explicitly warned that Russia would consider using nuclear weapons against Ukraine “if necessary.” In his statement, he argued that “our enemies love to make grandiloquent statements, using the terms ‘freedom,’ ‘democracy,’ ‘mission.’ In fact, this is just ritual verbal diarrhea.” He further described this rhetoric as “fountains of diarrhoeal demagoguery, coupled with vicious croaking rhetoric,” which he claimed has become a “long-proven weapon of the Anglo-Saxon world, with which they flood the rest of humanity in an attempt to defend their exclusivity and the right to rule the world.”²⁶

Nikolai Patrushev, the former secretary of the Russian Security Council and a key figure within Putin’s inner circle, is perhaps the most consistent and vocal user of the term “Anglo-Saxon,” attributing to this epithet the most malign intent and behavior. For example, in April 2023, he berated the “Anglo-Saxons” and their “inhuman plans” involving “biological research,” stating: “The Anglo-Saxon-led collective West continues to entertain the hope of defeating Russia, isolating on the world stage, and depriving it of its status as a great power capable of resisting the United States and its pursuit of global domination. It is important to understand that we have always stood in their way as they pursue these inhuman plans.”²⁷

In November that year, Patrushev warned of an increased risk of sabotage attacks against Russia from Ukraine involving biological weapons, describing this as a potential “biological war” at a meeting of the Scientific Council. He also reiterated Moscow’s longstanding claims that the United States has been attempting to develop “artificial pathogens and microorganisms” in laboratories established in some of Russia’s neighboring countries. Additionally, he argued that “the Anglo-Saxons,” under pretexts he deemed far-fetched, were obstructing

²⁴ Ivan Egorov interview with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev headlined: “The Liar in the Rye.”

²⁵ Andrey Mukovozchik, “The Anglo-Saxons Only Hide Behind Diplomacy and Democracy. While in Fact They Are Carrying Out Intervention,” *Belarus Segodnya*, June 10, 2022, <https://www.sb.by/articles/kak-v-prorubi.html>. – in Russian

²⁶ “Putin Ally Says Russia Will Use Nuclear Weapon in Ukraine ‘If Necessary,’” *Telegram* messaging service, September 27, 2022. – in Russian

²⁷ “Russian TV news: Lavrov at UN, NATO’S ‘proxy-war,’ ‘neo-Nazism,’” Main themes on Russian primetime TV news on NTV, Rossiya 1 and Channel One on April 25, 2022, *BBC Monitoring*, “Roundup,” April 26, 2023.

the creation of verification mechanisms under the conventions on the prohibition of biological and chemical weapons, which would place the biological activities of states party to the Convention under international control.²⁸

“Anglo-Saxon Atlanticists” and the “Collective West”

Context matters as it gives meaning. Russia uses the term “Anglo-Saxons” to describe its relationship with Europe and to frame its position as a state-civilization within a global context. While references to “Anglo-Saxons” appear in discussions of both European and global Russian imaginaries, we can infer that its meaning changes depending on the perceived functional utility of the term in Russian discourse, particularly in advancing Russian interests in the context of strategic confrontation.

When imagining the Euro-Atlantic world, Russia identifies a “Western civilization” with distinct Anglo-Saxon and continental Europe components.²⁹ Russia promotes the notion of a divide between the United States and the United Kingdom (referred to as the “Atlanticists”) on one side and the community of continental European states on the other – a community, it argues, undergoing a “crisis of traditional values.” Interestingly, Russia positions itself, as a traditional Christian (Orthodox) state, as the embodiment of “true Europe” and the defender of “traditional European values” against “foreign values” like those associated with the Anglo-Saxons.

This understanding finds official institutional expression in Russia’s 2023 Foreign Policy Concept, which offers insights into the ideological underpinnings of Russia’s strategic elite. The Concept provides a list of priority areas for Russian regional foreign policy. Notably, the term “Near Abroad” receives its first official usage and is listed as the top priority, while “Europe” ranks eighth and “United States and other Anglo-Saxon states” ninth.³⁰ The inherent incoherence of the term “Anglo-Saxon” is evident, as the document refrains from specifically naming states deemed “Anglo-Saxon.” Canada is not mentioned at all, while the United Kingdom is given just a brief paragraph. The “U.S. and other Anglo-Saxon states” are described as the “main inspirers, organizers, and executors of the

²⁸ “Patrushev Warns of Risks of Biological Threats in Southern Russia,” *TASS News Agency*, April 27, 2022, <https://tass.ru/politika/14492681>. – in Russian

²⁹ “Article by Alexey Drobinin, Director, Foreign Policy Planning Department, Russia’s Foreign Ministry ‘The Vision of a Multipolar World: The Civilizational Factor and Russia’s Place in the Emerging World Order,’ the Journal ‘Russia in Global Affairs,’ February 20, 2023,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Website*, February 20, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1854841/.

³⁰ Alexander E. Konkov, “Rules for a Game without Rules: In Search of a Foreign-Policy Breakthrough,” *Russia in Global Affairs* 21, no. 3 (July/September 2023): 114-126, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/rules-for-a-game-without-rules/>.

aggressive anti-Russia policy of the collective West” (article 62).³¹ More specifically, a statement published on Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs website on April 10, 2024, listed 22 representatives from UK state bodies, IT, and legal services sectors who were banned from entering Russia. The reason given: these individuals were deemed “accomplices to neo-Nazis, responsible for the deaths of people and potentially involved in activities against any country whose authorities do not align with the Anglo-Saxons.”³²

The objective here is to suggest that non-Anglo-Saxon Europe should align with Russia, or “true Europe,” thereby creating a new Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis, reminiscent of the alignment achieved on the eve of the Iraq war in March 2003. Russia’s leadership targets not only its domestic audience and the global South but also employs propaganda to influence the political discourse within Europe’s democratic societies. As Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov puts it: “In general, the Anglo-Saxons are significantly ramping up tension on the European continent. In this case, we, the Europeans, have something to think about. When a country outside our continent stirs up tension in our own home, that is wrong, and until we, Europeans, recognize that this harms us, I don’t think the situation can be rectified.”³³ This sentiment is echoed by Andrey Mukovozchik, who argues that the “Anglo-Saxons” are transitioning from using proxies to directly managing the structures they control: “By forcing Europe to impose insane sanctions on Belarus and Russia while simultaneously threatening with sanctions for the development of economic cooperation with China, the Anglo-Saxons have effectively subjugated the European Union.”³⁴ This theme was then echoed by Republika Srpska’s President Milorad Dodik, who argues that Russia has every right to defend its freedom, state, and people, adding that the “Anglo-Saxons” have pushed the European Union into conflict with Russia in Ukraine, depriving Europeans of cheap Russian gas and thereby weakening the EU economy.³⁵

In a global context, the Euro-Atlantic world is no longer the central reference point; the focus is on a united “collective West” – the so-called “civilized world.” This world is led by an elite G7 circle, with a British-American axis at its core (the “Anglo-Saxon core”), which opposes the “Russian world” and other “civilizational states.” Putin first used the phrase “the collective West” during his 2021 annual

³¹ “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Website*, March 31, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/.

³² “Statement by the Russian Foreign Ministry on Personal Sanctions against Representatives of Government Agencies, the IT Sector and the UK Legal Services Market,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Website*, Moscow, April 10, 2024, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1943473/. – in Russian

³³ “Peskov Called London’s Threats to Seize Russian Property an Alarming Signal,” *Interfax News Agency*, Moscow, January 31, 2022, www.interfax.ru/russia/819336. – in Russian

³⁴ Mukovozchik, “The Anglo-Saxons Only Hide Behind Diplomacy and Democracy.”

³⁵ “Bosnian Serb leader says Russia has right to defend its freedom,” *Alternativna Televizija (ATV)*, Banja Luka, in Serbian, 9 April 2024.

address to Russia's Federal Assembly and reiterated it in September 2022 when announcing mobilization. He stated: "Russia opposes the collective West," which "seeks to break up the country into parts."³⁶

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova has accused the United States and the United Kingdom of manipulating the G7 – a group whose relevance, she claims, is "over for good." She criticizes the G7 for making "Russophobic statements based on hatred" and calls for the "acceptance of the objective reality of the multipolar world in the making, without hegemony and neocolonial diktat." Zakharova argues that "G7 has, above all, through the efforts of the Anglo-Saxons, been turned into a certain headquarters for the West's fight against Russia and other independent states seeking to develop legitimate ties with each other." According to her, Washington and London are effectively using representatives from Berlin, Tokyo, Paris, and Rome as "useful idiots" to ensure support for their anti-Russian agenda.³⁷

In contrast to the "collective West," Russia is portrayed as a "civilizational state" – a global bulwark against the Western world's "totalitarian liberalism."³⁸ Russia's 2023 *Foreign Policy Concept* further characterizes Russia as distinct from Europe, describing it as a "distinctive (*samobytnaia*) state-civilization" (Article 4) with its unique historical trajectory, strategic orientation, core values, philosophy of self-sufficient development, and commitment to absolute sovereignty.³⁹ Russia is also depicted as a "vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power," which, due to its continental dimensions, asserts that it can "maintain sovereignty on the civilizational level."⁴⁰ In this framework, every "civilization" has a core, along with peripheral areas, which lack full sovereignty. Ukraine, then, is seen as one such contested periphery.

By 2024, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov stated, "The special military operation began as an operation against Ukraine; over time, it has taken on the form of a war against the collective West, a war in which the countries of the collective West, led by the United States, are directly involved."⁴¹ The special military operation (SVO) represents a collision of "tectonic plates," where Russian victory—or "reunification"—delivers a blow against the unipolar "Anglo-

³⁶ Efimov, Vasilchenko, and Lyapin, "The Collective West: What Is Putin Really Talking about When He Rails against the West?"

³⁷ "Russia criticises G7's 'Russophobic' statement," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in Russian, 27 February 2024; Ivan Pankin and Victor Matrosov, "Maria Zakharova on Radio KP: The Anglo-Saxons want to create instability along the entire perimeter of Russia. The protests in Georgia are a prime example of this," *Radio Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 15 March 2023.

³⁸ Efimov, Vasilchenko, and Lyapin, "The Collective West: What Is Putin Really Talking about When He Rails against the West?"

³⁹ "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation."

⁴⁰ Mikhail Suslov, "Isolationism, a Broad Eurasian Partnership, and a Left Tinge," *Russia.Post*, April 20, 2023, <https://russiapost.info/politics/isolationism>.

⁴¹ "Kremlin says 'military operation' in Ukraine turned into war with West," *TASS News Agency*, February 14, 2024. – in Russian

Saxon” world and accelerates the shift toward “fair multipolarity.” “Reunification” has become a mystical, sacred mission, justifying militancy, militarism, the cult of power, and hyper-nationalism. In this narrative, war is normalized, and “inevitable” victory is seen as the key to affirming Russia’s true identity as a “state-civilization.”⁴²

In 2024, Oleg Stepanov, Russia’s ambassador to Canada, argued that Ukraine has never had true agency, always acting as a U.S. proxy and remaining under external control in line with “Anglo-Saxon methodology.” He claimed, “In 2014, Washington put Kyiv on a short leash. The U.S. has been cultivating Russophobia after failing to shape Ukraine through “orange revolutions” – a “showcase of democracy” according to Anglo-Saxon methodology. The objective was to gain leverage against Russia and initiate a conflict to reestablish Washington’s control over Europe and the collective West during the decline of American-centric imperialism.”⁴³

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov went further, stating that all European states are now under the sway of an “Anglo-Saxon collective”: “Ukraine is a bargaining chip, a tool manipulated primarily by the United States and Great Britain – an Anglo-Saxon collective, now leading the West. NATO and the European Union, which have lost their independence long ago, are entirely obedient to it.”⁴⁴

“Anglo-Saxons” are portrayed as puppet masters, determined to arm Ukraine and support Ukrainian terrorist attacks against Russia, escalating the conflict while undermining Russian efforts to negotiate a ceasefire and initiate peace talks. FSB chief Alexander Bortnikov claims that the United States and the United Kingdom are using Ukraine as a proxy for perpetrating acts of terrorism and sabotage on Russian territory. According to Bortnikov, the Anglo-Saxons are behind the Ukrainian “centers for psychological operations,” which are waging a “massive campaign to destabilize Russia,” fomenting protests, promoting “neo-Nazi ideas,” and recruiting Russian nationals for acts of sabotage and terrorism.⁴⁵

In March 2024, Sergei Naryshkin, head of Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), accused “the Anglo-Saxons” of orchestrating the September 2022 explosions that damaged the Nord Stream underwater natural gas pipelines: “We, of course, had information and circumstantial signs pointing to who had done it.

⁴² Vladimir Pastukhov, “Operation ‘Russian Chromosome.’ What to Do after It,” *Novaya Gazeta*, March 23, 2022, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2022/03/23/vladimir-pastukhov-operatsiia-russkaia-khromosoma>. – in Russian

⁴³ “Ambassador of Russia in Canada Oleg V. Stepanov about ‘Malorossiya and a Little about the Future,’ February 22, 2024,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, February 24, 2024, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1934361/.

⁴⁴ “Russia’s Lavrov interviewed by Bosnian Serb TV on Ukraine, B-H, Kosovo,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, in Russian, 4 June 2022.

⁴⁵ “Russian TV News: Zelensky US Visit a Fiasco,” Main themes on Russian primetime TV news on NTV, Rossiya and Channel One on December 12, 2023, *BBC Monitoring*, Report, December 13, 2023.

The authors of the act themselves provided those circumstantial signs. The puzzle was complete. And that puzzle evidently points to the authors.”⁴⁶

The “Anglo-Saxons” are accused of not only widening and escalating the war but also derailing peace talks between Russia and Ukraine. Russian state TV daytime talk shows highlighted remarks by David Arakhamia, leader of President Volodymyr Zelensky’s Servant of the People party and head of the Ukrainian delegation during talks with Russia in 2022. Arakhamia claimed that Russia had proposed a cessation of hostilities in spring 2022, conditional on Ukraine abandoning its NATO aspirations and adopting neutrality. However, then-UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson reportedly made a surprise visit to Kyiv and urged Ukraine not to sign any potential agreement with Russia but to continue pushing for a military victory. Olga Skabeyeva, the host of *Rossiya 1’s 60 Minut*, commented: “Arakhamia has now confirmed that everything we said previously was true. The Anglo-Saxons indeed ordered that the war be continued, and Boris Johnson uttered the phrase ‘Don’t sign anything with Moscow – just fight!’.” Military pundit Igor Korotchenko added that it was “important to note that the UK, and the Anglo-Saxons as a whole, especially the British-American axis, are the main ideologues behind continuing a war that holds absolutely no prospects for Ukraine.”⁴⁷

For Putin, the period between the 15-17 March 2024 “election victory” and his 5th term inauguration on 7 May marks a critical phase where “Anglo-Saxon” destabilization becomes the glue that hardens and seals an all-encompassing encirclement narrative. The “collective West” concept also serves as an effective synonym. This narrative of “resistance to encirclement” is expected to be a key performance indicator for Putin’s leadership through 2030. In the aftermath of the terrorist attack at Moscow’s Crocus City Hall on March 22, 2024, Russia’s Communist Party leader, Gennady Zyuganov, claimed the attack was planned by the “Anglo-Saxons.” Speaking to *Rossiya 24*, he said: “Unfortunately, many of our citizens do not fully realize that the Anglo-Saxons, NATO, are conducting a war to destroy the Russian people. This wild, absolutely disgusting, barbaric terrorist attack is clear proof.” He then pointed to the “professional training” and “lack of mercy” of the terrorists, as well as the upcoming 25th anniversary of NATO’s bombing of Yugoslavia, as purported evidence of NATO’s involvement.

⁴⁶ “SVR: There Were Signs That the Anglo-Saxons Blew up the Nord Streams, Then the ‘Mosaic Came Together’,” *TASS News Agency*, March 5, 2024, <https://tass.ru/politika/20163369>. – in Russian. In September 2022, President Vladimir Putin through Dmitry Peskov accused “the Anglo-Saxons” of being behind the explosions that ruptured the Nord Stream natural gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea in 2022: “This act of terrorism against critical energy infrastructure, which also belonged to an international joint venture, was certainly, one way or another, organized by the United States of America and the United Kingdom. And they are in any case complicit in this terrorist act.” “Russia Blames US, UK for ‘Terrorist Attack’ on Nord Stream Pipeline,” *TASS News Agency*, September 27, 2023. – in Russian

⁴⁷ “Russian Talk Shows: UK’s Johnson Accused of Derailing Ukraine Peace Deal,” *BBC Monitoring*, Round-up, November 27, 2023.

Zyuganov dismissed reports of IS involvement as “crocodile tears” and suggested they were part of a U.S. attempt “to send everyone on a wild goose chase.”⁴⁸

Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev echoed these claims, stating that Ukraine had “financed” the attack but was ultimately “not independent, being run by the Anglo-Saxons.”⁴⁹ He asserted that NATO was “being used as a tool for Washington to conduct hybrid wars,” with “its members obediently following instructions to apply economic sanctions, freeze financial resources, conduct intelligence operations, carry out psychological warfare, launch cyberattacks, and are involved in actions to undermine and disorganize the public administration system of countries that do not agree with the policies of the Anglo-Saxons.”⁵⁰ Patrushev further reiterated these points when speaking at a regular annual meeting on security issues in Russia’s North-Western Federal District, citing a backdrop of “sabotage and terrorist activities by Ukrainian neo-Nazis using fascist methods.” Ukraine’s actions were directed, he asserted, and “having failed to achieve success on the battlefield, the criminal Kyiv regime, supported by the Anglo-Saxons and their henchmen, and with their direct coordination, deliberately commits acts of sabotage against civilian facilities, shells Russian border regions, uses fire weapons against the civilian population, commits terrorist acts in places of mass gathering of people, organizes assassination attempts on government officials, public figures and journalists.”⁵¹

There is an obvious tension and dissonance between the Euro-Atlantic and global contexts despite the recurring presence of “Anglo-Saxons” in both narratives. Within the Euro-Atlantic space, there is a division between the “Anglo-Saxon” Atlanticists and the European continental core, of which Russia is considered a part. On a global scale, the order is framed as a struggle between a united “collective West” (the G7) with its “Anglo-Saxon” core—portrayed as an eternal,

⁴⁸ “Briefing: Russia Commentators Sceptical of IS Moscow Attack Claim, Blame Ukraine,” *BBC Monitoring, Insight*, March 23, 2024. This assertion of “Anglo-Saxon” masterminds is echoed by propagandists in Belarus and Transnistria; see respectively: Andrey Mukovozhchik, “After the Terrorist Attack in the Suburbs of Moscow, Feelings Are Overwhelming. But They Must Be Followed by Thoughts,” *Belarus Today*, March 24, 2024, <https://www.sb.by/articles/ne-dopustit.html>. – in Russian; Andrew Safonov, “Crocus: Almost a Day Later. 10 Brief Conclusions,” *Facebook*, March 23, 2024, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0BwWdffbcSf8QTyzf518J5cjtQDr4vos9QujFJnPR6Qx9vfgzPXgoPZteBh5kK6RI&id=100006431271563&_rd_r. – in Russian

⁴⁹ “Russian Weekly TV Highlights: NATO, 75, ‘Devours’ Nations, ‘Creeps in’ on Russia,” *BBC Monitoring*, Round-up, April 9, 2024.

⁵⁰ Vitaly Tseplyaev, “‘Bloody History.’ Nikolai Patrushev Explained What NATO Has Come to in 75 Years,” *Argumenty i Fakty*, April 1, 2024, <https://aif.ru/politics/world/-krova-vaya-istoriya-nikolay-patrushev-obyasnil-k-chemu-nato-prishlo-za-75-let>. – in Russian

⁵¹ “Patrushev: Ukrainian Neo-Nazis Are Becoming More Active in Russia,” *TASS News Agency*, Moscow, April 16, 2024, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/20559387>. – in Russian. See also: Ivan Egorov, “Patrushev: Russia’s Power and Potential Have Always Irritated the West,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, April 16, 2024, <https://rg.ru/2024/04/16/anglo-saksam-zdes-ne-rady.html>.

existential threat to Russia and as being on the wrong side of history—and Russia, which presents itself as a “civilizational-state” on the right side of history, sitting alongside, as Dugin noted, “Chinese, Indian, Islamic, African, Latin American alternative civilizations to the West, which today are also looking for their own ideas. We are united by the fact that we categorically reject the hegemony of the United States and the unipolar world.”⁵²

The “Anglo-Saxon Reich” – “Fascist Anglo-Saxons Elite” and “Ordinary Nazis”

Another related “Anglo-Saxon” sub-theme worth exploring is the notion that the current “fascist Anglo-Saxons” are the intellectual and practical successors of Nazi Germany. This assertion rests on two key claims. First, the “Zelensky regime” itself is Nazi, often labeled a “Nazi Junta,” and since it is seen as a proxy, its “masters”—the “Anglo-Saxons”—must therefore also be considered Nazi. Second, this connection is not merely implied guilt by association; it is argued that the “Anglo-Saxon” powers represent both the intellectual precursors of the “Third Reich” and the inheritors of its legacy.

To illustrate the first pillar, Yevgeny Popov, host of *Rossiya 1’s 60 Minut* morning edition, drew parallels between present-day events and Nazi-era Germany on February 2, 2023, marking the 80th anniversary of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in the battle of Stalingrad (now Volgograd). As footage of German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius riding a Leopard 2 tank was shown, Popov stated that the tanks were to be sent on to “Ukrainian neo-Nazis, worthy successors of the Third Reich.” He also pointed out that the tank’s side was adorned with “practically the same crosses” that the Soviet people had seen on Germany’s WWII-era Tiger tanks 80 years ago. Popov then questioned: “Did no one tell Pistorius that he climbed into the tank the day before the anniversary of the Battle of Stalingrad, actually on the eve? Or did he forget, or was it intentional?”⁵³

In August 2023, both Lavrov and Patrushev separately commented on the role of the “Anglo-Saxons.” Addressing the 11th Moscow Conference on International Security, Lavrov stated that:

The “collective West,” allegedly to “save” the neo-Nazi Kyiv regime, has launched a hybrid aggression against Russia that spanned the military, political, legal, economic, and humanitarian spheres. Numerous facts unequivocally confirm that the Anglo-Saxons and their underlings spent years preparing the Kyiv regime for war, pouring weapons into Ukraine, and sabotaging the unanimously approved UN Security Council resolution on a peaceful settlement that took into consideration the legitimate interests of Donbas residents. On the contrary, the West tacitly and even approvingly observed as the

⁵² Gasyuk, “Russophiles and Multipolar Fighters from All Over the World Gathered in Moscow.”

⁵³ “Russian Talk Shows: Germany’s Nazi Past Invoked on Stalingrad Anniversary,” *BBC Monitoring*, Round-up, February 2, 2023.

putschist-founded Kyiv regime enacted laws banning the Russian language in education and culture, media, and everyday life.⁵⁴

Patrushev widened the aperture, claiming that, under the dictation of the “Anglo-Saxons,” Russophobia has spread throughout Ukraine and other European countries, particularly the Baltic states, “where everything Russian is also persecuted.” He argued that by installing a “neo-Nazi terrorist regime to power in Ukraine as a result of a bloody coup d’état, the Anglo-Saxons unleashed genocide against the Russian population. Since 2014, the residents of Donbas, and these are mostly Russian people, have been subject to violence and physical destruction.”⁵⁵

On February 18, 2024, Rossiya 1 revisited its familiar anti-Western and anti-Ukraine tropes in a report marking the 10th anniversary of Ukraine’s 2014 Euro-Maidan “Revolution of Dignity.” Dmitry Kiselyov of “Vesti Nedeli” characterized this event as a “bloody coup” that was “supported by the CIA” and enabled by Georgian snipers. He also suggested that current NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg might be considered for a role as a “special envoy” for Ukraine: “If this is the case, then the Anglo-Saxons are acting according to the logic and experience of the Third Reich. After all, a special envoy for Ukraine is exactly the same as Reichskommissar Erich Koch, a Gauleiter, a governor. Dress Stoltenberg in Koch’s uniform – and how organic, isn’t it?”⁵⁶ This commentary was accompanied by an image of Stoltenberg in a Nazi uniform.

In justifying Russia’s full-scale, multi-axis attack on Ukraine in February 2022, Dmitry Medvedev argued: “We could not idly watch how the odious nationalist regime of the heirs of Konovalts, Bandera, and Shukhevych [Ukrainian nationalist leaders before and during WW2], with the support of their supervisors, sought to obliterate not only Russia but the entire ‘Russian world,’ of which hundreds of millions proudly count themselves as members.”⁵⁷ According to this logic, “Ukraine is a spearhead in the hands of the Anglo-Saxons. They want to kill the Russian bear with this spear.”⁵⁸ This kind of thinking is also reflected in the

⁵⁴ “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Remarks at the 11th Moscow Conference on International Security, Moscow, August 15, 2023,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, August 15, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1900527/.

⁵⁵ Ivan Egorov, “Patrushev Accused the West of Unleashing Genocide of the Russian Population in Ukraine,” *TASS News Agency*, September 21, 2023, <https://tass.ru/politika/18805995>. – in Russian

⁵⁶ “Russian Weekly TV Highlights: Scarce Navalny Coverage, Focus on Putin, Avdiivka,” Main themes on Russian TV weekly news review programmes on Rossiya 1, Channel One and NTV on February 18, 2024, *BBC Monitoring*, Round-up, February 19, 2024.

⁵⁷ Dmitry Medvedev, “Our People, Our Land, Our Truth,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, December 26, 2022, https://cdnstatic.rg.ru/uploads/attachments/2022/12/25/rg012612_a14.pdf. – in Russian

⁵⁸ Daniil Bezsonov, “Ukraine Is the Tip of the Spear in the Hands of the Anglo-Saxons,” *For the Glory of the Motherland (Belarusian Military Newspaper)*, December 7, 2023, https://vsr.mil.by/rubrics/est_mnenie/daniil_bezsonov_ukraina_nakonechnik_kopya_v_rukakh_anglosaksov/.

graffiti left by retreating Russian soldiers in a school in Velyka Oleksandrivka, Kherson region. The graffiti reads: “Death to Yankee. Death to the Anglo-Saxons. And to the Jews and Euro-Gay.”⁵⁹

Second, the claim that the “Anglo-Saxons” were the genesis of the “Third Reich,” as well as its supposed role as keeper of the flame in the form of the “Atlantic Reich,” is a provocative element in the Russian narrative. Political analyst Alexei Martynov suggests that Nazi propaganda drew heavily from “Anglo-Saxon” models and originated from British colonial ideology. According to this reasoning, Hitler admired the Anglo-Saxons but was disappointed by Britain’s refusal to ally with him, attributing this to Britain’s unwillingness to tolerate equal partnerships.⁶⁰ The assertion is that the British colonial model of racial supremacy largely predetermined the ideology of the “Third Reich.” The idea of “Anglo-Saxon” civilizational supremacy, Senior Russian MP Leonid Slutsky contends, represents a form of “creeping fascism,” which he describes as a strategic tool in the “Anglo-Saxon” struggle against Russia. This ideology, he argues, was “invented to curb the growth of the Russian Empire’s long-term political and economic influence, specifically targeting Russian civilization on the European continent.”⁶¹

In 2016, then State Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin referenced Winston Churchill’s March 1946 “Iron Curtain” speech in Fulton, asserting it served as a “signal for the start of the Cold War” and proclaimed a world order “Anglo-Saxon-style,” where the USSR was marked as an adversary, and Churchill advocated dealing with it “from a position of strength.”⁶² In May 2023, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov likened NATO’s eastward expansion to Hitler’s *Drang nach Osten* (Drive to the East).⁶³ Later in 2023, Nikolai Patrushev, drawing on Alexander Shchipkov’s *Unfinished Nazism*, paints a straight line from the early British colonial model to the “Third Reich” and onward to modern “Atlanticist Nazism.” According to Patrushev, the ideas of the “blackshirts” and “browns” (the legacy of early fascist ideologies) have been adopted by the creators of “color revolutions,” who impose xenophobia to forcibly overthrow legitimate governments

⁵⁹ Ruta Hsu, “Ukraine War Two Years on – Graffiti Left by Russian Soldiers Has a Dark and Sobering Message,” *The Big Issue*, February 23, 2024, <https://www.bigissue.com/news/ukraine-war-two-years-russia-soldiers-graffiti/>.

⁶⁰ Marcus Colla, “Book Review: Hitler’s Anglo-Saxon Envy,” *The Lowy Institute*, September 13, 2019, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/book-review-hitler-s-anglo-saxon-envy>; Geoffrey Roberts, “Review of Brendan Simms, *Hitler: Only the World Was Enough* (Allen Lane, 2019),” *History Ireland* 28, no. 2 (March/April 2020), <https://historyireland.com/hitler-only-the-world-was-enough/>.

⁶¹ Slutsky, “The Ideology of the Liberal Democratic Party of the 21st Century Is Antifascism.”

⁶² Sergey Naryshkin, “The Reunification of Crimea with Russia Is the Biggest Event in Modern History,” *Izvestiya*, Moscow, March 17, 2016, <https://iz.ru/news/606649>. – in Russian; English translation at <http://duma.gov.ru/news/11941/>.

⁶³ “Russian TV News: Moscow Advances Its Vision of a New Multipolar World Order,” Main themes on Russian primetime TV news on NTV, Rossiya 1 and Channel One, May 24, 2023, *BBC Monitoring*, Round-up, May 25, 2023.

and create chaos in once stable regions. He claims that “by fomenting ethnic hatred, nurturing and fully supporting extremism, chauvinism and all forms of radicalism, the West creates a real threat to democratic and universal values, security, social stability, and societal unity.”⁶⁴

“Anglo-Saxons” as “Fifth Column” and “Foreign Agents”

The term “Anglo-Saxons” in contemporary Russian discourse functions as more than a foreign-policy label. Domestically, the term is often used interchangeably with terms like “foreign agent” or “fifth column,” implying both “guilt by association” and drawing a direct line between domestic political opposition, dissent, treason, arrest, incarceration, and even execution or murder. In Russia today, foreign-funded (and thus “Anglo-Saxon”-financed) nonprofit organizations engaged in any form of autonomous civic action are politically suspect, as “Anglo-Saxon” funding implies anti-Russian sympathies that do not align with the ethnocultural mentality and values of Russia as a fully-fledged sovereign, autonomous, strategic actor. This rhetoric serves a dual purpose. First, to silence critics and eliminate potential opposition to the autocratic status quo; second, to provide an abstract but dynamic enemy image that demands the attention of Russia’s strategic decision-makers, who are, of course, alert to and capable of addressing the danger. In other words, this narrative maintains popular support, frames and legitimizes Russian policy responses, and signals increasing autarky and isolation as the preferred direction.

Valery Garbuzov, former director of the Arbatov Institute of the USA and Canada at the Russian Academy of Sciences, published an article on August 29, 2023, in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* titled “On the Lost Illusions of a Bygone Era.”⁶⁵ He observed the “tragic pattern” of collapsed empires failing to reconcile with their diminished status, highlighting the post-World War II experiences of the French, British, and, later, the Russian empire after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In Russia’s case, he noted that, as is typical, post-imperial elites exploit anti-American “myths” through rhetoric about supposed Western decline, crises, resistance to globalization, and “Anglo-Saxon” world dominance. After facing widespread criticism from Russian media propagandists, Garbuzov responded with a rebuttal, in which he stated: “And I myself am not a secret West-

⁶⁴ Ivan Egorov, “Patrushev: The goal of the Anglo-Saxons Is to Destroy the Russian World, to Dismember the Country and Exterminate the Peoples Inhabiting Russia,” *Rossiskaya Gazeta Website*, November 30, 2023, <https://rg.ru/2023/11/30/patrushev-cel-anglosaksov-unichtozhit-russkij-mir-raschlenit-stranu-i-istrebit-narodynaseliaiushchie-rossiiu.html>. – in Russian

⁶⁵ “Director of the Institute of the USA and Canada Valery Garbuzov on the Lost Illusions of a Bygone Era,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, August 29, 2023, https://www.ng.ru/ideas/2023-08-29/7_8812_illusions.html. – in Russian

ern intelligence agent; I'm not an Anglo-Saxon spy; and I'm not a domestic enemy of my own Fatherland."⁶⁶ On the initiative of the Presidential Administration, the "Fundamentals of Russian Statehood," now part of Russian university curricula, is akin to lessons for schoolchildren known as "Talking about Important Things." A central conspiracy theory animates the core content of this post-Soviet ideological indoctrination: namely, that "the insidious West, led by the Anglo-Saxons and their hirelings both inside and outside the country, seeks to destroy and enslave Russia."⁶⁷

This domestic context's functional use of the term "Anglo-Saxons" is increasingly echoed in the practices, procedures, and policies of Russia's allies in its neighborhood. In Belarus, political analyst Alyksandr Klaskowski notes that the removal of signs in English at the Minsk Central Railway Station is "a manifestation of the current anti-Western course of the Belarusian authorities." It also demonstrates bureaucratic conformism, as "junior officials just keep their nose to the wind and try to comply zealously with this rhetoric, this anti-Western ideology from the high command." Vadzim Mazheyka argues that this reflects "Soviet thinking – that the enemy is in the West, and it is not only Lithuania and Poland, not only the Belarusian Latin alphabet but also the United States and various 'Anglo-Saxons' in general, so English is seen as the language of the enemy."⁶⁸

Russian propaganda is particularly active in deploying the concept of the "Anglo-Saxon" in Central Asia. Prior to September 2021, when the United States and ISAF forces were present in Afghanistan, Russian officials often claimed that Islamic State-Khorasan Province was a Western or U.S. invention, created from among Central Asian nationals to launch attacks against Russian interests in Central Asia and Russia itself. This reinforced a longstanding Russian narrative about Western covert support for Islamist groups – from Chechnya to Syria. Now, "Anglo-Saxons" have been inserted into this narrative. For instance, Sputnik's Tajik service featured Russian economic expert Vyacheslav Nekrasov, who argued that the "Anglo-Saxons" use Afghanistan to create tension on its border with Central Asia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), as well as to weaken the influence of Russia. He stated, "Of course, there are fewer terrorist attacks, but armed opposition exists in the form of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS – all these groups are present to one degree or another thanks

⁶⁶ Valery Garbuzov, "Valery Garbuzov. Continuation. A Sudden Storm Out of Nowhere," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, September 5, 2023, https://www.ng.ru/ideas/2023-09-05/100_2309051230.html.

⁶⁷ V.G., "Brainwashing in University Lecture Halls: V.G. Discusses How Indoctrination Is Destroying Russia's Higher Education," *Riddle*, November 7, 2022, <https://ridl.io/brainwashing-in-university-lecture-halls/>.

⁶⁸ "BBCM: Highlights from Belarusian Newspapers, News Websites, 17 January 2024," *BBC Monitoring*, Roundup, January 18, 2024.

to the support of the Anglo-Saxons, who continue their anti-Russian politics.”⁶⁹ The “Anglo-Saxons” are represented as a malign external force in Eurasia, continually “muddying the waters” and undermining emerging Eurasia Economic Union integration efforts. This propaganda further claims that anti-central government militants and protestors in Kazakhstan’s Zhanaozen, Tajikistan’s Badakhshan, and Uzbekistan’s Karakalpakstan were directed by British intelligence agencies to attempt (but failed) to overthrow the existing order: “So, it could be assumed that the issue of redistributing control over drug trafficking—the key instrument of Anglo-Saxon policy in Central Asia—from now on, will be addressed by the CIA, the ‘cousins’ of Mi-6 in the USA.”⁷⁰ Russian messaging continues, alleging that “the Anglo-Saxon masters of the instigators of the current turmoil” have since the 1990s attempted to “kindle ethnic hatred” according to “a long-term strategy implemented by various think-tanks, primarily Anglo-Saxon ones.”⁷¹

Additionally, Prince Rahim Aga Khan, the eldest son of Aga Khan IV and a board member of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), is accused by pro-Russian media in Central Asia of being part of a broader system of Western NGOs promoting liberal democratic values and expanding Western influence in the region in partnership with structures and funds associated with the United States, United Kingdom, and European states. Russian Telegram channel *AsiaToday* reported that these activities could exacerbate tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, concluding: “And the ultimate beneficiaries of such conflicts will, without a doubt, be the Anglo-Saxons. After all, the Aga Khan family is a key figure in Anglo-Saxon plans for the ‘Greater Waziristan’ project, which could impact all countries in the region.”⁷²

Such propaganda can achieve several objectives. First, it defects any internal discontent with central governments onto extra-regional “Anglo-Saxons,” a shared adversary with Russia. With common threat assessments comes shared interest and the promise of unified responses. Second, the portrayal of “Anglo-Saxons” as an alibi implies that opposing them equates to embracing Russian-led

⁶⁹ Vyacheslav Nekrasov, “Expert: Afghanistan Is Being Used to Create a Hotbed of Tension in Central Asia,” *Sputnik: Tajik Service*, February 20, 2024, <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20240220/afghanistan-ochag-napryazhennost-central-asia-1061779780.html>.

⁷⁰ UzMetronom Agency, July 14, 2022. – in Russian

⁷¹ Viktor Nikolayev interview with Andrei Grozin, head of the department for Central Asia and Kazakhstan of the Institute of CIS Countries headlined: “Controlled chaos of Karakalpakstan”: “Protests in Uzbekistan Were Organized by a ‘Third Force’: Controlled Chaos of Karakalpakstan,” *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, July 4, 2022, www.mk.ru/politics/2022/07/04/protesty-v-uzbekistane-organizovala-tretya-sila.html. See also: Agency for Ethno-National Strategies director Alexander Kobrinsky, “Kazakhstan May Lose Sovereignty: The West Has Wedged Into Relations Between Moscow and Nur-Sultan,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, July 10, 2022, https://www.ng.ru/vision/2022-07-10/5_8482_vision.html.

⁷² “Briefing: Aga Khan Activities Seen as Cause for Tension in Central Asia,” *BBC Monitoring*, Insight, March 21, 2024.

integration processes. For instance, on April 9, the privately-owned analytical website *Ritm Yevrazii* (Rhythm of Eurasia), which promotes Eurasian integration, published an article vilifying Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. The article portrayed him as a puppet of the West who makes vain attempts to turn Kazakhstan against Russia, stating: “Obedient to the collective West, the *Ukrokomik* [Ukrainian comic] Volodymyr Zelensky, who is ready to sell *Nezalezhnaya* [‘Independent,’ used as derogatory for Ukraine] and exterminate most of its population for a little money, is now completely out of control and becoming entirely unmanageable and undesirable to the Anglo-Saxons.”⁷³ Third, this propaganda reflects an underlying Russian attitude regarding the actual agency of Central Asian states: they have limited capacity and, without integration with Russia, cannot be protected. Governments that do not align with Russia do so because they are subservient (“Anglo-Saxons” are their puppet masters directing internal dissent). The notion that these states have agency, reflected in genuine policy disagreement with Russia or wish to pursue alternative paths, is not part of this worldview.

Conclusions

By his fourth presidential term, Putin, his inner circle, and state officials—such as Lavrov, Bortnikov, Naryshkin, Patrushev, Zakharova, Peskov, and Slutsky—began referencing and attributing to the “Anglo-Saxons” a range of highly negative, even fantastical, goals. State propagandists like Kiselyov, Solovyov, and their guests amplified these messages with heightened rhetoric. The term “Anglo-Saxon” has undoubtedly seized the psychological imagination of Russia’s elite: references made by state officials to the “Anglo-Saxons” in interviews, addresses, diplomatic exchanges, and in the *Foreign Policy Concept* are echoed and amplified by state media and further propagated by other state-controlled institutions, including the Russian Orthodox Church and the education system. Since the 2000s, nationalist public intellectuals have developed seemingly “evidence-based” but actually ahistorical narratives around Russia’s “state-civilization” genesis, framing them in opposition to the so-called eternal “Anglo-Saxons” — a constructed, timeless Western adversary rooted in the early medieval period.

This article has surveyed and explored who, when, and in what contexts Russian officials and public figures use the term “Anglo-Saxons” in the context of ever-increasing strategic confrontation. A study of this term’s usage reveals the architecture of Russia’s evolving state ideology. Marlène Laruelle identifies five interconnected elements that shape this ideological framework. First, there is a set of core worldviews and values. Second, there are broad discursive notions — floating signifiers like sovereignty, civilization, conservatism, Eurasia, and the

⁷³ Marat Nurgozhaev, “The Tail Bites the Dog: Has Kyiv’s Terrorist Regime Begun to Worry Its Western Masters?” *Rhythm of Eurasia*, April 9, 2024, www.ritm Eurasia.ru/news--2024-04-09--hvost-kusaet-sobaku-terroristicheskij-rezhim-kieva-nachal-bespo-koit-zapadnyh-hozjaev-72627. See also: “Zelensky Blamed for Trying to Sour Kazakh-Russian Ties,” *BBC Monitoring*, Round-up, 15 April 2024.

“Russian World”—each with its own intellectual history. Third, five major strategic narratives or storylines are employed by Putin’s regime to interpret political and social orders and to adapt to changing contexts: a) Russia as a civilization-state; b) Russia as *katechon*; c) Russia as a defender of traditional values; d) Russia as the anti-fascist power; and, e) Russia as the leading anti-colonial force. Fourth, official state doctrines and concepts, such as Russia’s 2023 Foreign Policy Concept, exemplify the formalization of these narratives. Finally, *ideologemes*, which Laurelle describes as “small key semantic units that reduce complex realities to simplistic slogans and mottos, populate the public space, especially state TV (‘Ukronazis,’ ‘collective West,’ ‘Russophobia,’ etc.)” Remarkably, Russia’s use of the term “Anglo-Saxons” corresponds to each of these elements.⁷⁴

First, and practically, “Anglo-Saxons” is a fungible abstraction that can be used to frame threats and justify corresponding responses. One core function is that of lineage and immutability: from time immemorial, “Anglo-Saxons” in various guises have sought to attack, denigrate, and damage Russia’s legitimate state interests, including blocking Russia’s historically sanctioned “reunification” with Ukraine. This framing suggests that Russia possesses a thousand-year history that qualifies it as a “state civilization.” This identity has been secured only through effective resistance to “Anglo-Saxon” aggression, drawing on a strong alternative strategic identity and values distinctive from “Europe.” Russia defines itself in the negative, by what it is not (“Anglo-Saxon”) rather than by what it is (multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, interdenominational). As Mimi Reitz observes, Russia uses “Anglo-Saxons” to counter and channel “rising ethno-nationalism into an anti-Western narrative of Russophobia, binding the country together as supra-ethnic *rossiiane* in their struggle against the real enemy – the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ world, and blaming grievances on inordinate discrimination.”⁷⁵ Only the current leadership and regime continuity can safeguard Russia’s ontological security. While “Anglo-American” could serve as a substitute for “Anglo-Saxon,” the latter term better supports the notion of lineage and abstraction.

Second, the strained logic and conspiratorial elements within Russian “Anglo-Saxon” thinking are evident in the belief that “Anglo-Saxon elites” control global finance and media, act as masterminds, and are ever-present behind the scenes, pulling strings, manipulating events, and advancing their interests. This reflects the tradition of holistic-dialectical thinking in Russia, where a wide aperture encompasses both the real and fantastical, allowing for the continual construction

⁷⁴ Marlène Laruelle, “Russia’s Ideological Construction in the Context of the War in Ukraine,” *IFRI Studies: Russie.Eurasie.Reports*, no. 46 (Paris: IFRI, March 2024), <https://www.ifri.org/en/studies/russias-ideological-construction-context-war-ukraine>.

⁷⁵ Mimi Reitz, “Weaponised ‘Russophobia,’” *Riddle Russia*, August 9, 2023, <https://ridl.io/weaponised-russophobia>. See also: Andrey Pertsev, “Russia’s Public Outing,” *Riddle Russia*, October 22, 2022, <https://ridl.io/russia-s-public-outing/>: “Many Russians were happy to repeat propaganda about ‘fascist Ukraine,’ ‘Banderites,’ ‘Anglo-Saxons’ and the horrors of life in the West, without giving them much thought.”

of new, creative alternatives that may bear little resemblance to the reality they purport to characterize. Certainly, Russian “Anglo-Saxon” messaging has not only become more frequent, intense, radical, and linguistically violent (employing imagery and dehumanization effects), but it also increasingly resembles caricature. For example, Patrushev notably asserts: “Some people in America claim that Eastern Europe and Siberia will become the safest places in the event of the possible eruption of the Yellowstone Volcano in the western United States. This is apparently the answer to the question of why the Anglo-Saxon elites are so keen to take ownership of this heartland.”⁷⁶ This likely reflects a regime self-radicalization dynamic, driven by a process of elite outbidding. On an individual level, paradoxically, alarmist language about the “Anglo-Saxon” threat, even demanding a nuclear response, signals risk aversion: individuals avoid the risk of appearing less alarmist than their colleagues. The real danger lies in the lack of rationality and proportion.

Third, the notion of an “Atlantic Reich” and “Anglo-Saxon Nazis” illustrates the dynamic and rapidly expanding nature of this denigration. What began in 2014 as a focus on the Azov Battalion and Right Sector in Ukraine has now broadened to encompass the entire “collective West.” The Russian objective of “denazification” in Ukraine presumably now targets a much larger foe. We observe a binary logic at work in structuring Russian thinking. If Russia is anti-Nazi and the USSR defeated the “Third Reich” in the Great Patriotic War, then Russia, as the legal successor to the Soviet Union, is poised to defeat the “Atlantic Nazis” once again in the 21st century. This time, however, Russia aligns with an “axis of resistance” against “Anglo-Saxon hegemony” alongside Iran, Belarus, and North Korea. If “Anglo-Saxons” is a synonym, ultimately, for a set of values, attitudes, and behaviors perceived as “anti-Russian” and Russophobic, then, by definition, Russia’s alternative norms are legitimized, and, as such, embraced and advanced by allies who may share them but are free to practice them differently.

Russia’s use of the term “Anglo-Saxons” may eventually morph into the more comprehensible “Anglo-American” trope or become subsumed under the broader notion of the “collective West.” However, the “Anglo-Saxons” label remains durable. First and foremost, and practically, “Anglo-Saxon” does not preclude Russia from attempting to polarize, divide, and split the “collective West” between its offshore and continental variants. Second, suppose French and German support for Ukraine grows even stronger. In that case, Russia can characterize the European Union as subjugated to “Anglo-Saxon” dominance, allowing Russian disinformation campaigns to target anti-status quo actors and rally them under the “axis of resistance” banner. Third, as Russia’s elite becomes increasingly radicalized by war, their worldview and core beliefs solidify, becoming more static, fixed in place, and demanding additional “empirical” validation. The

⁷⁶ Andrei Kolesnikov, “Blood and Iron: How Nationalist Imperialism Became Russia’s State Ideology,” *Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center*, December 6, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/11/blood-and-iron-how-nationalist-imperialism-became-russias-state-ideology>.

messaging tradeoff inherent in the “Anglo-Saxon” term itself—balancing abstraction and fungibility with comprehensibility/ purchase for internal Russian and external global audiences—becomes significant. These three reasons underscore the multiple roles of “Anglo-Saxons” in Russia’s psychological imagination and help explain why the term “Anglo-Saxons” will continue to dominate Russian geopolitical thinking.

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The European Union and Strategic Competition

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Abstract: The European Union perceives the world as multipolar, with countries of the Global South expanding their political and economic influence alongside the rivalry between the United States and China. Cooperation, compromise, and multilateral engagement are central to the EU's mode of operation, and the European Union and its member states favor this approach in shaping international relations. However, in a security environment characterized by strategic competition, the European Union, as the world's largest trading bloc, must assert its role. "Strategic interdependence" appears to be the EU's response to addressing the complexities of a changing world.

Keywords: European Union, EU, strategic competition, strategic interdependence, strategic autonomy, multilateral engagement.

Introduction

The international system is subject to power shifts that challenge the liberal international order. "Strategic competition" is the catchphrase in international politics. At its core, and from Washington's perspective, it refers primarily to the contest for military, technological, and geopolitical supremacy between the United States and China since the early 2000s, particularly after 2017, when the Trump Administration adopted a new National Security Strategy.¹ However, other actors like the European Union have a more nuanced view of strategic

¹ The document identifies China as the United States' "strategic competitor." For a thorough analysis of the provenance and usage of the term "strategic competition" in contemporary history, see Stephanie Christine Winkler, "Strategic Competition and US-China Relations: A Conceptual Analysis," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 2023): 333-356, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poad008>.

competition. Instead of reducing global power shifts to a new *bipolar* world order (“Cold War 2.0”) dominated by the United States and China, the European Union and its member states recognize strategic competition as a feature of an emerging *multipolar* world characterized by the increased economic and political influence of middle powers worldwide. Indeed, empirical data shows that a new class of middle powers today has much more agency than they did during the Cold War.²

This article aims to accurately assess the EU’s perception of strategic competition and examine how the European Union defines its future role in the world. To contextualize its potential role, the article briefly analyzes the EU’s interests in relation to other major powers, including the United States, Russia, China, and India. It further explores how the European Union seeks to navigate the opportunities and challenges posed by strategic competition. What are the EU’s capabilities, networks, and policies for influencing strategic competition at both the global and regional levels? And to what end?

The European Union as a Hybrid Actor in International Politics

The European Union is neither a nation-state nor a traditional intergovernmental organization. It possesses characteristics of both, yet it remains distinct. The European Union is *sui generis* – an entity of its own kind. It is “hybrid” in uniquely combining supranational and intergovernmental features with a set of EU institutions operating alongside its member states (MS).

The 2009 Treaty of Lisbon divides competences into three categories: exclusive competences of the European Union, shared competences between the European Union and the Member States (MS), and supporting competences of the European Union.³ These categories also apply to the spectrum of the EU’s foreign

² See Aslı Aydıntaşbaş et al., “Strategic Interdependence: Europe’s New Approach in a World of Middle Powers,” Policy Brief (European Council on Foreign Relations, October 3, 2023), 2, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/strategic-interdependence-europes-new-approach-in-a-world-of-middle-powers/>: “In 1950, the US and its major allies (NATO countries, Australia, and Japan) and the communist world (the Soviet Union, China, and the Eastern Bloc) together accounted for 88 per cent of global GDP. Today, these groups of countries combined account for only 57 per cent of global GDP and are all having to compete with new players in emerging fields of power such as tech and climate.”

³ See Articles 2-6 and Part Five of the “Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, October 26, 2012, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:12012E/TXT:en:PDF>. Articles 23-46 of the “Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union” outline the specific rules governing the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which are predominantly intergovernmental. In contrast, the Common Commercial Policy, Development Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid, Economic and Financial Cooperation with Third States, Restrictive Measures, and International Agreements involve all EU institutions, including the Council, the Commission, and the Parliament. “Consolidated Version of

and security policy as well as its external relations. The European Union can be a very powerful actor when it has exclusive competence under the treaties, with the European Commission taking the lead. The Lisbon Treaty also endowed the Union with legal personality under international law, enabling it to conclude international treaties and secure a seat in many multilateral organizations.

The EU's ability to act can be equally strong when the EU Commission, European Parliament, and the member states (via the Council of the European Union and the European Council of Heads of State or Government) work in concert or when the member states demonstrate solid political unity. The unified response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine since February 24, 2022 is a case in point. Never before have the European Union and its member states exported weapons to an active warring party,⁴ nor have they agreed upon and imposed sanctions (against Russia) on such a scale. Conversely, the EU's ability to act is very weak when it has only shared or supporting competences and member states are divided. This was clearly evident during the EU's crisis management efforts in the Eastern Mediterranean from 2020 to 2021, for example, when the policies of France and Italy vis-à-vis Turkey nearly contradicted each other.⁵ Similar divisions were also visible with respect to Libya.

The EU's Perception of Strategic Competition and Its Future Role in the World

The history and rationale of European integration are key to understanding the EU's perception of and approach to strategic competition. At its core, the European Union is a peace project; it has never been a great power project. The reconciliation between France and Germany after two World Wars marked the beginning of European integration in the 1950s. Peace and freedom on the European continent have remained the guiding principles of the EU's integration and enlargement efforts to this day.

Strategic Competition in a Multipolar World

The European Union recognizes the growing antagonism between the United States and China. Still, it perceives strategic competition as more complex due

the Treaty on European Union," *Official Journal of the European Union*, October 26, 2012, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12012M%2FTXT>.

⁴ Since the start of the war and up until April 2024, the EU and its member states combined have provided nearly 35 billion USD in military assistance, including ammunition, air-defense systems, Leopard tanks, and fighter jets. This amount includes an unprecedented 12 billion USD from the European Peace Facility (EPF), in addition to bilateral contributions from the member states. See "EU Assistance to Ukraine (in U.S. Dollars)," *Delegation of the European Union to the United States of America*, September 23, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/united-states-america/eu-assistance-ukraine-us-dollars_en. Member states contribute to the EPF and get reimbursed by it.

⁵ Katrin Bastian, "The EU in the Eastern Mediterranean – a 'Geopolitical' Actor?" *Orbis* 65, no. 3 (Summer 2021): 483-489, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2021.06.010>.

to the rise of middle powers in the “Global South” that refuse to take sides with any great power.⁶ The European Union explicitly acknowledges the existence of a multipolar world, a perspective shared by many member states in their public statements.⁷

The European Union views itself as being affected by all domains of strategic competition. *Military competition* between great powers is perceived as the most serious threat, given the historical experience of Europeans throughout the 20th century, particularly the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. Today, the European continent is severely threatened by a revanchist Russia, which claims that its war of aggression against Ukraine is a reaction to NATO’s expansion eastward.

When it comes to *economic competition*, the European Union is still challenged by global power shifts but finds itself in a much more comfortable position.⁸ The crown jewels of the European Union are its international networks. Currently, “the EU has in place the largest trade network in the world, with over 40 individual agreements with countries and regions.”⁹ However, this degree of interconnectedness comes at a price and exposes vulnerabilities. The simultaneous efforts to reduce Europe’s dependency on Russian gas, phase out other fossil fuels, and achieve climate neutrality by 2050 place significant pressure on European industry. Additionally, this creates new dependencies on China, which is rich in the rare earths necessary for Europe’s Green Deal.

Technological competition—particularly in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI)—represents the greatest challenge today, as it affects all sectors and poses

⁶ Compare Katrin Bastian et al., “Perspectives on Strategic Competition,” George C. Marshall Center Policy Brief No. 1, November 2024, 3, www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/policy-briefs/perspectives-strategic-competition. For a discussion of the “battle of narratives” in strategic competition, see Frank Hagemann, “Zwischen Mars & Venus. Europa im strategischen Wettbewerb,” *Zeitschrift für Innere Führung*, no. 1 (2024): 34-43, <https://www.bundeswehr.de/resource/blob/5730018/eca72eaa-aa496f00b0f473de88c6861b/if-zeitschrift-fuer-innere-fuehrung-01-2024-data.pdf>.

⁷ See “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence,” European External Action Service, March 24, 2022, 17-23, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-0_en. See also the speech by German chancellor Olaf Scholz at the 78th UN General Assembly, in which he states that multipolarity is not a normative category but rather constitutes the status quo. “Rede von Bundeskanzler Scholz zur 78. Generaldebatte der Generalversammlung der Vereinten Nationen am 19. September 2023,” *Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations in New York*, September 19, 2023, <https://new-york-un.diplo.de/un-de/2619364-2619364>. – in German

⁸ The Union has the third-largest share of global GDP, with a projected \$17.8 trillion in 2023, following the U.S. with \$26.9 trillion and China with \$19.4 trillion. Japan (\$4.4 trillion) and India (\$3.7 trillion) rank fourth and fifth. See Pallavi Rao, “Visualizing the \$105 Trillion World Economy in One Chart,” based on sources from IMF Datamapper, and World Economic Outlook 2023, *Visual Capitalist*, August 9, 2023, www.visualcapitalist.com/visualizing-the-105-trillion-world-economy-in-one-chart/.

⁹ “Trade Agreements,” European Commission, Access2Markets, <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/access-to-markets/en/content/trade-agreements-0>.

significant regulatory, governance, and security dilemmas for the European Union. In her 2023 State of the Union Address, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen quoted a warning from leading AI developers and experts: “Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war.”¹⁰ On February 2, 2024, the European Union adopted a provisional Artificial Intelligence Act to ensure that AI systems in the EU market are safe and align with the EU’s fundamental rights and values. It is the first legislation of its kind in the world.¹¹

How Does the EU Define Its Future Role in the World?

When it comes to Europe’s role in global *normative competition*, the European Union is very clear and confident about its values. Virtually no statements or documents on foreign and security policy are issued without EU leaders emphasizing their commitment to democracy, social justice, human rights, and the international rules-based order. In an early and quite remarkable “Declaration on European Identity,” adopted in December 1973, the Heads of State or Government of the nine member states affirmed their determination to integrate the concept of European identity into their common foreign relations.¹² Nearly fifty years later, in March 2022, the European Union reaffirmed its self-perception as a major international actor in the Strategic Compass:

With 27 Member States and 450 million citizens, our Union remains the world’s biggest single market, the most important trade and investment partner for many countries, in particular in our neighbourhood, and the largest source of development assistance. The EU is a norm setter and has been a consistent leader investing in effective multilateral solutions. With our crisis management missions and operations operating on three continents, we

¹⁰ “2023 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen,” European Commission, September 13, 2023, Strasbourg, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_4426.

¹¹ “Artificial Intelligence Act: Council and Parliament Strike a Deal on the First Rules for AI in the World,” *Press Release*, Council of the European Union, December 9, 2023, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/12/09/artificial-intelligence-act-council-and-parliament-strike-a-deal-on-the-first-worldwide-rules-for-ai/.

¹² “European unification is not directed against anyone, nor is it inspired by a desire for power. On the contrary, the Nine are convinced that their union will benefit the whole international community since it will constitute an element of equilibrium and a basis for co-operation with all countries, whatever their size, culture or social system.” *Bulletin of the European Communities* 6, no. 12 (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, December 1973), <https://aei.pitt.edu/57092/1/BUL104.pdf>. “Declaration on European Identity (Copenhagen, 14 December 1973),” *Centre virtuel de la connaissance sur l’Europe (CVCE)*, 118-122, https://www.cvce.eu/obj/declaration_on_european_identity_copenhagen_14_december_1973-en-02798dc9-9c69-4b7d-b2c9-f03a8db7da32.html.

have shown that we are ready to take risks for peace and shoulder our share of global security responsibilities.¹³

Derived from recent EU policies and initiatives on resilience, economic security, and partnership diplomacy, as well as the EU's engagement in security and defense, the following self-image is emerging for the EU's *future role* in the world:

A Stable and Reliable European Union: The European Union continues to view itself as an anchor of stability on the European continent, projecting to international partners the promise of peaceful cooperation and predictability through fair trade agreements and adherence to international law.

A Geopolitical European Union: The European Union and its member states have recognized that strategic competition requires a better understanding of their geopolitical and geo-economic interests. More than any of her predecessors, Commission President von der Leyen links the EU's neighborhood policy, partnership diplomacy, and global initiatives with geopolitical considerations.¹⁴ This approach is exemplified by the EU's Global Gateway project, which aims to offer an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

A European Union Engaged in Strategic Interdependence: Rather than *decoupling* its industry from the global economy, the European Union prefers a well-thought-out *de-risking* strategy that does not unravel its international networks but reduces one-sided dependencies on a particular country or resource. Diversifying its partners has become an urgent requirement for the European Union, which explains Brussels' increasing engagement with emerging powers in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

The (older) concept of "strategic autonomy" originated as an approach to EU security and defense aiming to reduce dependence on the United States. Recently, it has been expanded into the notion of "open strategic autonomy," which describes the EU's willingness to act more strategically in its own interest without sacrificing its international economic network.¹⁵

"Strategic interdependence," a notion proposed by a group of authors from the European Council on Foreign Relations, is described as

¹³ "A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence," 14.

¹⁴ Nicole Koenig, "The 'geopolitical' European Commission and its pitfalls," Policy Brief, Hertie School, Jacques Delors Centre, 2019, https://www.hertie-school.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Policy_Brief_Nicole_geopolitical_commission.pdf.

¹⁵ See Mario Damen, "EU Strategic Autonomy 2013-2023. From Concept to Capacity," Policy Brief, 2022, European Parliament. Compare also Spain's National Office of Foresight and Strategy: Resilient EU 2030. A future-oriented approach to reinforce the EU's Open Strategic Autonomy and Global Leadership, published for the Spanish EU Presidency, 2023, <https://spanish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/the-spanish-presidency-presents-resilient-eu2030-roadmap-to-boost-european-union-open-strategic-autonomy/>.

a middle way between strategic autonomy—which threatens to divide the EU and alienate the rest of the world—and full alignment with the US in an anti-China bloc. Where strategic autonomy aims “to act autonomously when and where necessary,” strategic interdependence acknowledges and emphasises the complex reality of our interconnected world. It advocates building resilience to the weaponisation of dependencies whether in the fields of migration, technology, or trade, but pushes back against the idea of decoupling.¹⁶

In practice, (open) strategic autonomy and strategic interdependence need not contradict each other. Their objective is similar: to enhance the EU’s external agency and maneuverability by (1) achieving a clearer understanding of its own core interests, values, and mission and (2) acting more pragmatically and strategically in its own interest vis-à-vis the rest of the world. This includes cooperating with partners who do not necessarily share the European mindset.

The European Union as a Security Provider: While the European Union is preparing to take greater responsibility for its security in Europe—such as by increasing investment in its defense sector—it does not appear to be pursuing the concept of *military* strategic autonomy with great vigor. This is largely due to a lack of consensus among member states on relieving the United States of its security guarantees for Europe.¹⁷ The European Union will most likely work towards strengthening the European pillar within NATO, as maintaining good transatlantic relations is considered a *raison d’état* for many EU member states. However, a potentially decreasing U.S. defense commitment to Europe will push the European Union to assume greater responsibility for its own defense.¹⁸

When it comes to crisis management within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the European Union has accumulated extensive knowledge and experience worldwide.¹⁹ A recent study by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs examines EU crisis management in the context of

¹⁶ Aydıntaşbaş et al., “Strategic Interdependence: Europe’s New Approach in a World of Middle Powers,” 14.

¹⁷ The term “strategic autonomy” is used only once in “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence,” 23.

¹⁸ In her bid for a second term as EU Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen stated that European security and defense would be a priority in her program, signaling ambitions to further communitarize parts of the CSDP by appointing an EU Commissioner for Defense and working toward a European Defence Union through the systematic pooling of resources and partial transition to a war economy. Barbara Moens, Zia Weise, and Hans von der Burchard, “Von der Leyen’s 2nd-term Pitch: More Military Might, Less Climate Talk,” *Politico*, February 19, 2024, www.politico.eu/article/ursula-von-der-leyen-military-defense-slimite-second-term/. See also the guest article by Ursula von der Leyen and CDU/CSU opposition leader Friedrich Merz of February 23, 2024, in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: “Eine echte Verteidigungsunion schaffen,” <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/merz-und-von-der-leyen-zu-ukraine-krieg-eu-sollte-verteidigungsunion-schaffen-19540491.html>. - in German

¹⁹ Since 2003, the European Union has conducted over 37 overseas operations, deploying both civilian and military missions and operations in several countries across

strategic competition. The study highlights how strategic competition complicates the execution of EU crisis management by (1) increasing both the number and diversity of actors involved in conflicts, (2) intensifying competition over approaches to conflict management and resolution, and (3) fueling contestation over democratic governance and peacebuilding ideals. In other words, the *normative* dimension of strategic competition, along with the exploitation of conflicts by external state and non-state actors, have rendered EU missions more challenging and complex.²⁰

Combined with internal dynamics that suggest a growing geopolitical orientation, future EU crisis management seems to be characterized by three trends: (a) a geopolitical turn marked by a stronger emphasis on the EU's strategic interests when deciding where to intervene; (b) an increased security-focused orientation ("train and equip")²¹; and (c) the formation of ad hoc mandatory frameworks and coalitions.

Strategic Competition as a Balancing Act: Managing Relations with the United States, Russia, China, and India

This section will briefly outline the EU's strategic relations with the United States, Russia, China, and India. The main challenge for the European Union is managing these relationships in line with its interests while avoiding alienating its most important partner, the United States.

EU – United States

The United States is by far the most important strategic partner of the European Union. Both sides share a long history of cooperation, with NATO serving as the cornerstone of their relationship. U.S. security guarantees to its NATO allies are vital for Europe. From an EU perspective, close EU-NATO cooperation is, therefore, a top priority. Currently, U.S./NATO and EU collaboration remains strong but limited due to the severe tensions between Turkey, a non-EU state, and Cyprus, a non-NATO member. The European Union and NATO coordinate and join forces to support Ukraine. Additionally, the European Union is supporting the U.S.-UK operation in the Red Sea, and in March 2023, the United States and the

Europe, Africa, and Asia. Currently, there are 21 ongoing CSDP missions and operations, 12 of which are civilian and 9 military.

²⁰ Katariina Mustasilta, "The EU's External Conflict Responses: Drivers and Emerging Trends in the Era of Strategic Competition," FIIA Working Paper No. 135, *Finish Institute of International Affairs*, September 2023, especially pp. 9-14, https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/wp135_eus-external-conflict-responses.pdf.

²¹ Mustasilta, "The EU's External Conflict Responses," 12: "Despite the development of the integrated approach and more rhetorical emphasis on a holistic approach, research suggests that the EU's engagement in conflict and crisis situations is more and more (not less) security-oriented."

European Union conducted their first-ever joint naval exercise in the Indo-Pacific.²²

A key challenge lies in the perception of *strategic competition* itself. The U.S. focus on its rivalry with China clashes with the EU's view of the world as multipolar. These differing perspectives lead to asymmetric assessments of Russia and China. For the European Union, Russia is considered the biggest threat, while perceptions of China vary by sector. Conversely, for the United States, China is seen as the primary global threat, with Russia viewed mainly as a threat to Europe. The difficulty with these differing assessments is that the European Union and the United States often arrive at divergent conclusions about global threats despite their shared culture, history, and commitment to a rules-based international order.

One example of this is strategic competition in the realm of technology, where the European Union risks being caught between the United States and China. The Biden administration has taken decisive steps to use export controls as a strategic tool vis-à-vis China.²³ In October 2022, the United States began restricting trade in semiconductor technologies with China. By January 2023, Japan and the Netherlands had joined this policy through an agreement with the United States that effectively limits the export of the most advanced microchips and the tools to produce them to China. Other European countries and the European Union as a whole are under pressure to align with the U.S.'s strategic export control policies toward Beijing, complicating efforts to adopt a differentiated approach to China.

EU – Russia

Following the adoption of the Treaty of Amsterdam in May 1999, Russia, of all countries, became the addressee of the EU's first "Common Strategy," a new instrument in the toolbox of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).²⁴

²² On February 19, 2024, EU foreign ministers officially launched the EUNAVFOR ASPIDES mission to safeguard freedom of navigation in response to the Red Sea crisis. See "Security and Freedom of Navigation in the Red Sea: Council Launches EUNAVFOR ASPIDES," Press Release, Council of the European Union, February 19, 2024, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/02/19/security-and-freedom-of-navigation-in-the-red-sea-council-launches-new-eu-defensive-operation/; "US: First Ever Joint Naval Exercise Conducted Between the EU and U.S.," European Union External Action, March 24, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/us-first-ever-joint-naval-exercise-conducted-between-eu-and-us_en.

²³ The stated objective of the United States is to "maintain as large a lead as possible" over China in key technologies, particularly in semiconductors, which have dual-use qualities. See Tobias Gehrke and Julian Ringhof, "The Power of Control: How the EU Can Shape the New Era of Strategic Export Restrictions," *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, May 17, 2023, 4, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-power-of-control-how-the-eu-can-shape-the-new-era-of-strategic-export-restrictions/>.

²⁴ Council of the European Union, "1999/414/CFSP: Common Strategy of the European Union of 4 June 1999 on Russia," *EUR-Lex*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:31999E0414>.

Until Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, there were hopes that EU-Russia relations could develop in a constructive manner. The experience of Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas in 2014 could and should have served as an eye-opener for all Europeans regarding Moscow's intentions. However, it took the full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022 for Europe to fully grasp Russia's determination to dominate its neighbor and former Soviet republic. In Russia's perception, its war against Ukraine is part of a broader, if not global, struggle against the political West aimed at establishing an international order in which the spheres of interests of great powers are respected.²⁵

Today, Europeans understand that Russia will remain the primary threat to their security and territorial integrity for years to come. Given that the European Union is unable to confront Russia without Washington's conventional forces and nuclear security guarantees within NATO, there might come a time when the United States will ask for European solidarity in a potential standoff with China over Taiwan – a scenario for which Europeans are neither materially nor mentally prepared.²⁶

A hard lesson for the European Union to learn is that many middle powers in Asia, Africa, and Latin America do not see a need to fully align themselves with the European response to Russia's war of aggression. While over 130 UN member states have condemned Russia's invasion, many have been unwilling to support the EU's sanctions regime. Therefore, it is not beneficial for Brussels to condition its partnership diplomacy or "strategic interdependence" with countries such as Brazil, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, or South Korea on their proximity to or distance from Moscow.²⁷ This is likely one of the core lessons for the European Union if it wants to act more pragmatically.

²⁵ Russia expert Arkady Moshes describes the EU-Russia relationship as a series of mutual misperceptions. Arkady Moshes, "The Troubled Partnership: The EU and Russia," contribution to the workshop on "Strategic Partnership as an Instrument of EU Foreign Policy," April 13, 2015, hosted by The Centre for European Studies at Carleton University, Canada, 17-19, <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2015/12/Strategic-Partnership-Workshop-Report-final.pdf>.

²⁶ Jana Puglierin and Pawel Zerka, "Keeping America Close, Russia Down, and China Far Away: How Europeans Navigate a Competitive World," *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), June 7, 2023, 18, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/keeping-america-close-russia-down-and-china-far-away-how-europeans-navigate-a-competitive-world/>.

²⁷ See the results of the comprehensive opinion poll conducted for the ECFR's and Oxford University's research project "Europe in a Changing World": Timothy Garton Ash, Ivan Krastev, and Mark Leonard, "Living in an à la carte World: What European Policymakers Should Learn from Global Public Opinion," *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), November 15, 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/living-in-an-a-la-carte-world-what-european-policy-makers-should-learn-from-global-public-opinion/>.

EU – China

China is perhaps the partner within the EU's international network with the widest gap between close trade partnership on the one hand and political alienation on the other. The Tiananmen massacre in 1989 served as a wake-up call for the Europeans, making them realize how determined the Communist Party was to preserve its status and China's societal system. Despite the arms embargo against Beijing, which is still in place today, trade relations and Western foreign direct investment in China have flourished. The European Union has watched China's rise in the Far East with a mixture of fascination and fear. The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, along with the initiation of the 16+1 engagement with Central and Eastern European countries a year earlier—many of which are EU member states—showed Europeans that China had ambitions for a global leadership role. In 2021, China's GDP surpassed that of the European Union for the first time. Today, the United States, China, and the European Union occupy many of the world's "top three" positions, with the European Union typically ranking third after the United States and China.²⁸

The increasing assertiveness of Beijing and mounting tensions between the United States and China prompted the European Union to review its China policy in 2019. Depending on the subject or sector, the European External Action Service developed a doctrine that regarded Beijing as a partner, competitor, or rival.²⁹ Since 2019, President Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party have continued on their path, challenging the West on technological advances, supply chain reliability, the international law of the sea, the status of Taiwan, human rights in Xinjiang, control over Hong Kong, and alternative interpretations of the international order.

To a great extent, the EU's room for maneuver in strategic competition is shaped by the U.S.-China and China-Russia relationships. The rivalry between Washington and Beijing impacted Europe before 2022, but with Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine since February 2022 and given Europe's reliance on U.S. security guarantees, the scope for an individual European China policy has diminished, while the pressure to align with Washington has increased.³⁰ The

²⁸ This applies, for example, to the projected share of global GDP in 2023 and military expenditure in 2022. In terms of the value of global trade in goods and services, the EU ranked first in 2022. Eurostat, "World Trade in Goods and Services – an Overview," *Statistics Explained*, data extracted in July 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=World_trade_in_goods_and_services_-_an_overview.

²⁹ European Commission and HR/VP Contribution to the European Council, "EU-China – A Strategic Outlook," Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council, March 12, 2019, 4, <https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2019-03/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>.

³⁰ See also Sinikukka Saari, Niklas Helwig, Juha Jokela, and Mikael Mattlin, "EU-China Relations in an Uncertain World: Walking a Geopolitical Tightrope," *FIIA Briefing Paper* no. 376, Finish Institute of International Affairs, November 2023, 6, www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/bp376_eu-china-relations-in-an-uncertain-world.pdf.

European Union is also closely monitoring the China-Russia partnership, a “friendship without limits,” as Putin and Xi Jinping declared in February 2022, just days before Russia invaded Ukraine.

Open-source data indicates a significant increase in Russian imports of Chinese-manufactured dual-use goods. In response, EU representatives used the latest EU-China Summit in December 2023 to warn China against supplying lethal weapons to Russia and to demand support in preventing Russia from circumventing sanctions.³¹ However, realizing that Beijing remained unimpressed by this request, the EU’s 13th sanctions package on Russia, for the first time, targets Chinese and Indian companies accused of supporting Moscow’s war effort.³²

EU – India

As with the United States and China, the European Union is engaged with India in an institutionalized “Strategic Partnership,” a format proposed by the 2003 European Security Strategy. However, there is a consensus in the academic literature that the full potential of this partnership has not yet been fully realized.³³ A “Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement” between the European Union and India has been on hold since 2013, despite their important trade relations.³⁴ However, negotiations were resumed in June 2022, with plans to be finalized in 2024.

³¹ “EU-China Summit, 7 December 2023, Main Results,” European Council and Council of the European Union, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2023/12/07/>. Some reports attribute the failure of Ukraine’s autumn 2023 counteroffensive to China’s constant supply of Russia with vehicles and key components for weapons production. See, for example, Markus Garlauskas, Joseph Webster, and Emma C. Verges, “China’s Support for Russia Has Been Hindering Ukraine’s Counteroffensive,” Atlantic Council, November 15, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/chinas-support-for-russia-has-been-hindering-ukraines-counteroffensive/>.

³² “EU adopts 13th package of sanctions against Russia after two years of its war of aggression against Ukraine,” *Press Release*, European Commission, February 23, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_963: “The Council added 27 new entities to the list of those directly supporting Russia’s military and industrial complex in its war of aggression against Ukraine. ... Some of these entities are located in third countries (India, Sri Lanka, China, Serbia, Kazakhstan, Thailand, and Turkey) and have been involved in the circumvention of trade restrictions.”

³³ Lucyna Czechowska, “Joint Bodies and the Regularization of Strategic Interaction: A Comparison of the European Union’s Strategic Partnerships with Japan and India,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* (JCMS) 60, no. 4 (July 2022): 1144-1164, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13325>.

³⁴ The European Union is India’s third-largest trading partner, accounting for € 88 billion in trade in goods in 2021, or 10.8 % of India’s total trade, following the USA (11.6 %) and China (11.4 %). India is the EU’s 10th-largest trading partner, representing 2.1 % of the EU’s total trade in goods in 2021, well behind China (16.2 %), the USA (14.7 %), and the UK (10 %). See “India: EU Trade Relations with India. Facts, Figures and Latest Developments,” European Commission, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/india_en.

From a strategic perspective, the European Union appears to regard India as its most important partner in shaping its Indo-Pacific strategy. When considered together, the 2018 Strategy on India and the 2021 Strategy on the Indo-Pacific suggest that the European Union offers the region an alternative trajectory to the U.S.-China rivalry.³⁵ The EU's interest is to make India an ally in promoting the rules-based international order, effective multilateralism, the protection of human rights, and the achievement of internationally agreed objectives, such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the realization of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

In the Indo-Pacific, the European Union must carefully balance its strategic messaging towards three different partners or regions: (1) *vis-à-vis the United States*, the message is that the European Union and its member states are ready to take on a greater share in safeguarding a free, secure, and stable maritime environment in the region, not least as an act of reciprocity for Washington's security role in Europe; (2) *towards China*, the message is that "the EU's approach to the region is one of cooperation, not confrontation," and "inclusive of all partners wishing to cooperate with the EU";³⁶ and (3) *vis-à-vis India, and also ASEAN* (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), the message is that the European Union shares their perception of the world as multipolar, not bipolar; that their rising power and influence in the region and beyond are recognized; and that they are valued cooperation partners to the European Union, including in a region-to-region format. The litmus test for the EU's new geopolitical pragmatism will be its ability to endure differing perceptions of India and other "Global South" partners regarding Russia's war against Ukraine or the Israel-Gaza conflict.³⁷

³⁵ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, September 16, 2021, www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf. See also Frederick Kliem, "The EU Strategy on Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: A Meaningful Regional Complement?" Policy Brief, *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*, January 2021, https://www.kas.de/documents/288143/16920728/Panorama+2021_01+Kliem.pdf.

³⁶ "Questions and Answers: EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," European Commission, September 16, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_21_4709.

³⁷ In the UN General Assembly (UNGA) vote on March 2, 2022, on Resolution A/ES-11/L.1, condemning Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, India abstained along with 34 other countries, while all EU member states voted in favor. In another UNGA vote on February 2, 2023, calling for Russia's immediate and unconditional withdrawal from Ukraine, India abstained again – maintaining its neutral stance on Russia's actions. For details, see the UN Digital Library on Voting Data, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/search?ln=en&cc=Voting+Data>. Regarding the voting behavior of the European Union and India on the war in Gaza, both sides demonstrated a relatively high degree of alignment. In the UN General Assembly vote on October 27, 2023, for an immediate humanitarian truce in Gaza to facilitate humanitarian aid, India abstained, as did 15

EU Responses to Strategic Competition

The previous sections provided an analysis of the EU's perception of strategic competition and its role within it, as well as an outline of Brussels' interests vis-à-vis other major powers. This final section discusses the EU's policy responses to strategic competition, which can be divided into four categories: EU Enlargement, EU Neighborhood Policy, EU partnership diplomacy, and measures to secure the EU's economic-industrial base. A fifth category, which is beyond the scope of this article, is the EU's role in the governance of global commons – such as climate and environmental policies, maritime security, space security, and the EU's capacity for setting norms and standards in these sectors.

EU Enlargement

Sometimes overlooked as a geopolitical instrument in its own right, EU enlargement can be seen as the most forceful expression of the Union's strategic intent. Overall, and from a historical perspective, the accession of new member states has proven to be a success story, contributing to stabilization, economic development, and opportunities for younger generations. The various enlargement rounds, especially the one leading to the accession of ten new Eastern and Central European members in 2004, have demonstrated the staying power of the EU Commission once negotiations have begun. The strategic dimension of enlargement is currently gaining momentum, with nine accession candidates on the EU's agenda. The Western Balkan countries—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia—are each progressing at their own pace.³⁸ Negotiations with Turkey, ongoing since 2005, have effectively stalled due to Ankara's autocratic turn in 2016 and allegations of human rights violations. Meanwhile, the European Union has recognized that the longer the accession process takes, the more influence other actors, such as Russia and China, can gain in the region.

The newest official EU candidates are Ukraine and Moldova (June 2022), later joined by Georgia (December 2023), demonstrating the Union's resolve not to be deterred by an ongoing war and geopolitical tensions with Russia. In fact, this decision straightforwardly rejected the idea of a Russian sphere of influence in the EU's Eastern neighborhood. In December 2023, the European Council agreed to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova.

EU member states. In a subsequent vote on December 12, 2023, on an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza, India voted "yes," alongside 17 EU member states.

³⁸ Accession negotiations are underway with Albania (since 2020), Montenegro (since 2012), North Macedonia (since 2020), and Serbia (since 2014). In December 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate status, while Kosovo submitted its membership application.

EU Neighborhood Policy (ENP)

With the invitation for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia to join the Union, the number of ENP partner countries will shrink from 16 to 13. This raises the question of how Brussels will deal with the remaining states of the Eastern Partnership (as the Eastern dimension of the ENP)—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus—and how it will design relations with the diverse group of ten countries in the EU's Southern Neighborhood.³⁹

With Georgia granted EU candidate status, it will be difficult in the future not to extend such status to Armenia, Azerbaijan, or Belarus, should these countries ever express interest and demonstrate progress in meeting the conditions for membership. In the years ahead, the European Union will most likely seek to enhance cooperation with Armenia and Azerbaijan through the Eastern Partnership, integrating them into a broader strategic design for the post-Soviet space. More specifically, these two countries could become important partners in the EU's connectivity agenda, linking the Black Sea region, the South Caucasus, the Caspian region, and Central Asia.⁴⁰ Ultimately, this will require a more comprehensive Eastern Neighborhood policy that includes Central Asia.⁴¹

Geography dictates that the Southern Neighborhood is not considered European; therefore, accession to the European Union is not an option. However, the European Union is deeply connected with its Southern partners. A study by the Bertelsmann Foundation details the scope and depth of these relations across trade, finance, technology and knowledge exchange, infrastructure connectivity, and labor mobility. In all these sectors, with few exceptions, the European Union is the dominant partner for most neighboring countries. However, its economic importance is not matched by political influence.⁴²

Although the report predicts growing interdependence between the European Union and its Southern neighbors (e.g., in energy, food security, and labor),

³⁹ Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Palestine, and Tunisia.

⁴⁰ See, for example, the EU Global Gateway, "Investors Forum for EU-Central Asia Transport Connectivity, 29-30 January 2024, at SQUARE Brussels," https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/investors-forum-eu-central-asia-transport-connectivity_en. The event brought together governments, financing institutions, businesses, and civil society from Europe, Central Asia, and beyond. A total of €10 billion has been committed to sustainable transport connectivity in Central Asia.

⁴¹ Stefan Meister, Milan Nič, Iskra Kirova, and Steven Blockmans, "Russia's War in Ukraine: Rethinking the EU's Eastern Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy," *DGAP Report*, German Council on Foreign Relations, January 20, 2023, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/russias-war-ukraine-rethinking-eus-eastern-enlargement-and-neighborhood>. Such a broad vision, of course, depends on the outcome of Russia's war against Ukraine, Russia's future domestic development, its role in Central Asia, and the overall EU-Russia relationship.

⁴² Richard Grieson and Stefani Weiss, eds., "Keeping Friends Closer: Why the EU Should Address New Geoeconomic Realities and Get Its Neighbors Back in the Fold," Report, 2nd updated edition (Bertelsmann Stiftung & The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, May 2023), <https://doi.org/10.11586/2023025>.

the European Union has not yet aligned mutual interests within an attractive framework across the Northern and Southern shores of the Mediterranean. This diagnosis may do injustice to existing formats like the Union for the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, competing—if not contradictory—approaches by Southern EU member states (especially France and Italy), the lack of horizontal connectivity among North African states, and the political fragmentation of the Middle East have hindered the development of a common vision for a more integrated Mediterranean space. If the European Union wants to prevent China from becoming the partner of choice, it must more decisively strengthen its ties with the countries of the Middle East and North Africa.⁴³

EU Partnership Diplomacy with Emerging Powers

While the European Union looks back on a long history of partnership diplomacy, Russia's war of aggression has prompted it to further diversify its strategic partnerships with renewed vigor.⁴⁴ In addition to the over 40 trade agreements already in place, Brussels has recently concluded or renewed trade agreements with Chile (March 2024) and New Zealand (June 2022), and an Economic Partnership Agreement with Kenya (June 2023), all of which are currently under ratification. Negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Australia and an EU-Mexico Association Agreement are expected to be completed by the end of 2024. New efforts are underway to ratify the EU-Mercosur Agreement, which has been under negotiation since 2000 and was concluded in June 2019. Mercosur unites Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay, with the European Union being the group's leading trading and investment partner. As mentioned, negotiations with India on a trade and investment agreement resumed in June 2022. Like the trade agreements achieved with Singapore (2014) and Vietnam (2015), the European Union is currently negotiating a free trade agreement with Indonesia. Bilateral talks with Jakarta began in 2016, and in December 2023, the 16th round of negotiations was held, demonstrating perseverance and a mutual willingness to compromise.⁴⁵

⁴³ For example, this could involve concluding fairer trade agreements to avoid increasing trade deficits in the Global South, engaging in political dialogue on an equal footing, increasing investment in connectivity, showing a willingness to tackle the energy transition and the implications of climate change together, and developing mechanisms and schemes that offer positive prospects for the next generation, while enabling labor mobility and limiting illegal migration to the European Union. See "Keeping Friends Closer," 83-92.

⁴⁴ Michael Smith, "The Geopolitics of the EU's Partnership Diplomacy: Strategic, Managerial, or Reactive?" *International Politics* 56, no. 3 (June 2019): 288-303, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-017-0127-8>; and Claudia Schmucker and Klemens Kober, "A Turning Point for EU Trade Policy After the Russian Aggression? Ukraine: The War that Changed the World, One Year On," DGAP External Publication, German Council on Foreign Relations, February 23, 2023, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/turning-point-eu-trade-policy-after-russian-aggression>.

⁴⁵ All EU trade agreements and individual country/region relations can be found at https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region_en.

Functional Responses to Secure the European Economic-industrial Base

Finally, the EU's response to strategic competition can be seen in a whole range of initiatives aimed at securing its economic-industrial base:

A New EU Trade Policy: In February 2021, the EU Commission presented its new trade strategy, *An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy*. Rather than advocating that production should be brought back to the EU for greater autonomy, the Commission promotes greater openness to trade and investment as a means of supporting the EU economy's recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

EU Global Gateway: Launched in December 2021, the Global Gateway is the EU's initiative to address the existing global investment gap in infrastructure and connectivity. It aims to promote trade, economic growth, and diplomatic ties with key partners. Global Gateway projects emphasize building global connections rather than dependencies, offering a European alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative.⁴⁶

EU Economic Security Strategy: Adopted in June 2023, the Economic Security Strategy outlines three priorities for securing the EU economic-industrial base: (1) promoting the EU's competitiveness by enhancing the resilience of the economy and supply chains, for example, through fostering research in strategic areas, such as advanced semiconductors, quantum computing, biotechnology, net-zero industries, clean energy, and critical raw materials; (2) protecting the European economy from commonly identified risks by more vigorously deploying existing tools, including trade defense measures, foreign subsidy controls, 5G/6G security measures, foreign direct investment screening, export controls, and the newly introduced instrument to counter economic coercion; and (3) partnering with the "broadest possible range of countries" to reinforce economic security, foster resilient and sustainable value chains, and strengthen the international rules-based economic order and multilateral institutions.⁴⁷

EU Critical Raw Materials Act: In its first annual *Critical Minerals Market Review*, released in July 2023, the International Energy Agency (IEA) highlighted the

⁴⁶ Beijing's efforts are significantly larger in financial terms: China provided over one trillion USD between 2013 and 2023, while the Global Gateway initiative is endowed with 300 billion euros for the period 2021-2027. Both initiatives are strategic projects aimed at competing for connectivity and partnerships. However, the EU approach emphasizes transparency and sustainability, aligning more closely with international objectives such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals. See Kalum Rock and Christian Hanelt, "Global Gateway: The EU Maps a Different Path than Belt and Road," *New Perspectives on Global & European Dynamics*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, October 19, 2023, <https://globaleurope.eu/europes-future/global-gateway-the-eu-maps-a-different-path-than-belt-and-road/>.

⁴⁷ European Commission, "Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on 'European Economic Security Strategy'," JOIN (2023)20 final, Brussels, June 20, 2023, 3-4, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52023JC0020>.

significantly increased demand for minerals needed for clean energy technologies.⁴⁸ In response to risks associated with supply chain disruptions, the European Parliament adopted the Critical Raw Materials Act in December 2023, just nine months after the Commission's proposal in March.⁴⁹ The new legislation mandates that by 2030, no single non-EU country shall produce more than 65 % of the EU's annual consumption of any strategic raw material.⁵⁰

New EU Subsidy Policy: To retain key industries in Europe, the EU Commission introduced a "matching aid mechanism," allowing EU member states to subsidize a company to the same extent it would receive in a third country outside the European Economic Area for its investment. The German government and Swedish battery producer Northvolt became the first to utilize this mechanism in January 2024.⁵¹

Conclusion

This article has shed light on the European Union's perception of strategic competition, its role in the world, the management of its relations with other major powers, and its efforts to navigate an era of global power shifts.

The degree of interconnectedness in today's globalized world was starkly revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic and further underscored by the consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine – particularly in the areas of global food

⁴⁸ Between 2017 and 2022, global demand increased by 300 % for lithium, 70 % for cobalt, and 40 % for nickel, with this growth expected to continue in the coming years. See International Energy Agency (IEA), "Critical Minerals Market Review 2023," December 2023, www.iea.org/reports/critical-minerals-market-review-2023.

⁴⁹ European Commission, "Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a framework for ensuring a secure and sustainable supply of critical raw materials and amending Regulations (EU) 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, 2018/1724 and (EU) 2019/1020," COM(2023) 160 final, Brussels, March 16, 2023, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:903d35cc-c4a2-11ed-a05c-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF.

⁵⁰ In addition, benchmarks have been set for the EU's own *domestic* capacities, which by 2030 will: (1) extract at least 10 % of the EU's annual consumption; (2) process at least 40 % of the EU's annual consumption; and (3) recycle at least 15 % of the EU's annual consumption. The EU Commission also plans to establish a "Critical Raw Materials Club," a platform to bring together resource-hungry and resource-rich countries to collaborate on diversifying critical raw materials value chains. See Francesco Findeisen, "The Club Approach: Towards Successful EU Critical Raw Materials Diplomacy," Policy Brief, Jacques Delors Centre, Hertie School, October 31, 2023, https://www.delorscentre.eu/fileadmin/2_Research/1_About_our_research/2_Research_centres/6_Jacques_Delors_Centre/Publications/20231031_Findeisen_CriticalRawMaterials.pdf.

⁵¹ Northvolt will receive €902 million in German state aid to build a gigafactory for battery cell production in the town of Heide, northern Germany. Without this instrument, Northvolt would have shifted its investment to the United States to take advantage of the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act.

supply chains and energy security. As the world's largest trading bloc, the European Union soon realized that *decoupling* from the global economy was not a viable option. Instead, the European Union and its member states have committed to *expanding* their international network at full speed. Efforts focus on diversifying both energy resources and partner countries while simultaneously enhancing the legislative framework to support domestic industries.

The repeatedly stated ambition to cooperate “with the broadest possible range of partners” reflects several key features of how the European Union intends to “navigate” strategic competition. The EU shows

- *self-confidence* in its ability to shape relationships in its own interest and leverage its regulatory power by setting trade, industrial, labor, and human rights standards;
- *pragmatism* in choosing partners, recognizing that it cannot afford to divide the world into liberal democracies and restrictive autocracies; instead, Brussels must define red lines on a case-by-case basis;
- *geopolitical orientation*, combining its own transformation agenda (energy, climate, digitalization) with smart partnership diplomacy (e.g., connectivity, Global Gateway);
- *confidence* in its *diplomatic skillset* and staying power, as negotiation, cooperation, and compromise capabilities are central to its “DNA”; the EU has proven its ability to successfully negotiate EU accessions or trade agreements over 20 years;
- *balanced global relations*: The European Union believes that bilateral relations with other great powers like the United States, Russia, China, and India can be optimized and balanced with regional partnerships to sustain a global network.

The EU's competitive formula seems to be “who cooperates best and in the most strategic fashion.” This distinguishes the European Union from other players on the global stage.

The EU's activities over the last five years in the fields of accession policy, partnership and trade diplomacy, the green and digital transition, and initiatives on economic and supply chain security, coupled with considerations of geopolitics and connectivity, demonstrate its ability to act and adapt to a security environment shaped by strategic competition. While many of these initiatives reflect the EU Commission's determination, the political unity of the member states has been crucial for united action – especially in supporting Ukraine.

However, this analysis has also revealed the challenges the EU faces, particularly in the areas of security and the transatlantic alliance. The United States remains by far the EU's most important strategic partner; however, Washington's tendency to divide the world into pro- and anti-China coalitions will complicate the EU-U.S. relationship. With 23 out of 27 EU member states also being members of NATO, the European Union and its member states are struggling to balance a more independent and cooperative approach to strategic competition

with reliance on continued U.S. security commitments within NATO and on the European continent.

Hoping to count on the United States as a reliable partner, the EU's ultimate goal in international politics remains unchanged: to uphold the rules-based international order and promote effective multilateralism. This goal is not only to sustain economic interoperability in a globalized world but also to address global challenges that no country can manage alone, such as maritime security, space security, and the effects of climate change and environmental degradation.

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India's Stake and Role in the U.S.-China Strategic Competition

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Abstract: This article analyzes India's stake and role in the context of the renewed confrontational relationship between Washington and Beijing. The examination of India's strategic vision, along with the changing dynamics of its bilateral ties with the United States, China, and Russia, demonstrates that New Delhi's foreign policy toward Washington has been shaped by events in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, as well as by the dynamics of America's evolving relationships with key Asian powers. India has assumed a prominent role in the United States' efforts to enforce a rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific. Both nations have leveraged shared values to deepen their engagement, also driven by pragmatic considerations. At the same time, maintaining close relations with the United States has become a strategic necessity for India. The partnership between India and the United States has been reinforced by their increasingly adversarial relationships with China. India has shown a noticeable shift in its approach to the U.S.-China strategic rivalry, driven by New Delhi's changing threat perception of China – from a partner to a security threat.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Global South, Quad, strategic rivalry, military-technical partnership, Russia-Ukraine war.

Introduction

India gained independence from Britain in 1947 with the Partition of the Indian subcontinent into two sovereign political entities. Like many post-colonial countries, India adopted a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy and has become a great success story in institutionalizing and consolidating democracy. Though rooted in Hindu civilizational ethos, India is constitutionally secular and

remains a multicultural, multilingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious society. It also has the second-largest Muslim population in the world, after Indonesia – a fact often highlighted by the country's top political leaders.¹ In 2023, India emerged as the world's most populous country, overtaking China. According to reliable projections, India is expected to achieve growth of more than 6 percent over the next five years and become the world's third-largest economy by 2030.²

The rise of the U.S.-China strategic rivalry has posed an increasing challenge for Asia's middle powers, including India, as the great power competition forces them to reveal their strategic choices between Washington and Beijing. While many countries are unwilling to take sides, India's changing threat perception has led New Delhi to lean toward Washington over Beijing on important geo-strategic issues. India has strengthened its bilateral and multilateral ties with the United States and its key allies to counter the China challenge. As global trade relationships deteriorate, India is also implementing policies aimed at boosting domestic manufacturing. The subsequent sections of this article explore how India's evolving strategy has profound implications for the U.S.-China competition and Asia's geopolitical landscape.

India's Strategic Vision

The British Raj has provided independent India with a geopolitical frame of reference. It is undeniable that India's political geography is inherited from the colonial experiments of the British Indian Empire. The British Raj was one of the most successful centralizing political entities, able to integrate and rule India for more than two hundred years. This success was primarily made possible through various geopolitical instruments, such as partnerships with native ruling elites, shrewd management of local political affairs to counter divisive tendencies, and the expansion of economic networks throughout the empire as well as in neighboring and peripheral regions. The British also demonstrated skill in controlling turbulent frontiers within the subcontinent and creating institutional structures for governance, diplomacy, and security.³ Notwithstanding the Indian nationalist movement's emphatic rejection of this imperial edifice, its realpolitik essence has greatly influenced independent India's geopolitical outlook and continues to guide its strategic vision. The British Raj's efforts to expand economic influence while preventing European interference in the subcontinent left a lasting legacy

¹ "India Home to Second Largest Population of Muslims in World: President Murmu," *Outlook*, July 12, 2023, www.outlookindia.com/national/india-home-to-second-largest-population-of-muslims-in-world-president-murmu-news-302281.

² Florian Zandt, "Which Countries Have the Highest GDP Growth Rate?" *Statista*, January 17, 2024, www.statista.com/chart/31587/real-gdp-growth-top-6-economies/.

³ C. Raja Mohan, "Securing India's Rise," in Ashley J. Tellis and C. Raja Mohan, *The Strategic Rationale for Deeper U.S.-Indian Economic Ties: American and Indian Perspectives* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2015/08/the-strategic-rationale-for-deeper-us-indian-economic-ties>.

of India's centrality in the British imperial system, particularly in the Indian Ocean region. Unsurprisingly, this legacy continues to guide Indian strategic planning.

At the same time, the humiliating experience of being a British colony for two hundred years shaped core ideas of Indian foreign policy, particularly the doctrine of "non-alignment." Non-alignment was used to keep India out of Cold War military entanglements with either the United States or the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the Cold War severely undermined India's focus on economic, social, and political development, effectively splitting the international order into two antagonistic ideological camps.

When Pakistan joined military alliances led or sponsored by the United States against the USSR,⁴ India felt compelled to divert vital resources intended for economic development into military competition. As a result, the Soviet connection became invaluable for India, particularly when Pakistan sought to counterbalance India with the help of American arms and military aid. Though the resulting Indo-Soviet partnership was criticized as a compromise of India's non-aligned stance, it was, in reality, the pragmatic response to policies or pressures from the Western camp during the Cold War.

Moreover, India's relations with the USSR were devoid of any ideological considerations as shared geopolitical interests firmed them up.⁵ Following the Sino-U.S. rapprochement in the early 1970s, Washington had little incentive to help build Indian military defenses against China, making India more dependent on the Soviet Union.⁶ Gradually, the Soviet Union not only became India's leading source of weapon systems but also facilitated the licensed production of Soviet-designed aircraft and tanks in India, creating a decades-long dependency.

Though the notion of Asian solidarity could not withstand the fierce Chinese realism of the 1960s, non-alignment is still acknowledged as one of the cornerstones of India's foreign policy. While the term "non-alignment" lost much of its practical relevance after the end of the Cold War, its underlying principles have been revived in a new mantra known as "strategic autonomy."⁷

Despite being a rising power, India remains a strong proponent of a territorial *status quo* and has not engaged in offensive wars against its neighbors—Pakistan and China—unless provoked. Having participated continuously and actively in

⁴ Pakistan signed the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with the United States in 1954. Later, Pakistan became a member of the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), either led or sponsored by the United States to contain communism.

⁵ Rajan Menon, "India and Russia: The Anatomy and Evolution of a Relationship," in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*, ed. David M. Malone, C. Raja Mohan, and Srinath Raghavan (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198743538.013.37>.

⁶ Tanvi Madan, *Fateful Triangle: How China Shaped U.S.-India Relations during the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Rowman & Littlefield/ Brookings Institution Press, 2020).

⁷ Rahul Mishra, "From Non-alignment to Multi-alignment: Assessing India's Foreign Policy Shift," *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 112, no. 1 (2023): 43-56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2023.2165367>.

the UN system and other multilateral forums, India is generally comfortable with the post-war international order, provided it is granted a respectable decision-making role. India is no longer the strategic lightweight it was during most of the Cold War, so its foreign policy behavior is under close scrutiny. The current Indian leadership is adopting a more assertive stance in regional and global politics. By the middle of this century, India will likely emerge as the only geopolitical peer to the United States and China. With these two powers locked in strategic competition, India's strategic outlook seems clear: China is viewed as the most formidable security threat, while the United States is seen as the most promising partner.

India's support for Western objectives in maintaining the rules-based international order will continue to be driven by New Delhi's overall strategic vision. In contrast to the Western emphasis on the "rules-based international order" and Russia and China's inclination toward a "multipolar" world, India would prefer a "multipolar" rules-based international order in which it is one of the poles.

Major Threats and Challenges

India faces a complex set of challenges on the strategic front. The foremost concern is the threat to its territorial integrity, both in terms of maritime and land borders, with China emerging as the most serious national security threat.⁸ Similarly, Pakistan continues to be a strategic nuisance, as maintaining hostility toward India forms the core of Pakistan's national identity.⁹ Thus, the potential threat of a two-front war with China and Pakistan looms large. In addition to these external threats, maritime security in the Indian Ocean region has taken center stage in the present-day geopolitical and geostrategic competition between an authoritarian China, with its historical concept of the Silk Road, and the Quad member countries advocating for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." The growing menace of terrorism and radicalization, with groups like al-Qaeda, ISIS, and various Pakistan-based/sponsored terrorist organizations posing a threat, further complicates the situation. An additional factor is the escalating anti-India activities of some Sikh separatists based in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, adding an international dimension to India's national security

⁸ "China the Biggest Security Threat: Chief of Defence Staff General Rawat," *Business Standard*, Bloomberg, November 13, 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/china-the-biggest-security-threat-chief-of-defence-staff-general-rawat-121111300026_1.html; Michael Kugelman, "China Has Become India's Greatest Threat," *Foreign Policy*, January 19, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/19/india-china-military-threat-security-pakistan/>.

⁹ Karl-Heinz Kamp, "The Case for a Coherent South Asia Strategy: No Zero-Sum Choice between India and Pakistan," *Security Policy Working Paper* No. 11/2018, Federal Academy for Security Policy, 2018, <https://www.baks.bund.de/en/working-papers/2018/the-case-for-a-coherent-south-asia-strategy-no-zero-sum-choice-between-india-and>.

concerns. Internally, small pockets of the country continue to grapple with long-term insurgencies, necessitating a delicate balance in the military response.

Significant steps have been taken to speed up India's military modernization, but the challenge lies in reducing foreign military dependence and ensuring the establishment of a self-sufficient defense manufacturing hub. The United States has emerged as India's most important partner in the economic, technological, geopolitical, and defense domains, contributing to several of India's national security objectives. On the other hand, defense cooperation remains the most crucial pillar of the India-Russia strategic partnership. Over the years, the New Delhi-Moscow military cooperation has evolved from a buyer-seller relationship to joint development and production of new military platforms. Although Russia remains a major supplier of weapons to India, it faces stiff competition from Western countries, including France, Israel, and the United States.

Despite being a significant power in the current international order, India's regional and global outreach has been somewhat constrained due to its limited financial resources, particularly when compared to China's growing "debt-trap diplomacy" in India's immediate neighborhood. Therefore, New Delhi must focus on two priorities: first, countering Beijing's growing financial clout in the region, and second, addressing the increasingly multifaceted security challenges both within and outside India.

Relations with Major Powers

America

The relationship between India and the United States has transitioned from being "adversarial" during the Cold War to that of a "natural ally" in the era of emerging strategic confrontation between Washington and Beijing. This shift is primarily due to India's policy of strategic autonomy, which is currently evolving into a multi-alignment approach. The end of the Cold War created fertile ground for a qualitative transformation in the nature of India-U.S. relations, even though Washington remained critical of India's nuclear program and its stance on human rights issues in Kashmir. However, the breakthrough came when the United States, faced with the terrorist threat, reconsidered its strategic priorities and began to look toward India. Both the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations went on to emphasize that America's relations with India would shape the twenty-first century.¹⁰ The contemporary transformation in bilateral ties is underpinned by America's strategic bet on India to counter China, as well as by India's democratic credentials, economic potential, and the extent of its soft power approach in international relations. As India emerges as a crucial developmental partner across Asia and Africa, the United States increasingly views it as an alternative to China.

¹⁰ Varghese K. George, *Open Embrace: India-US Ties in the Age of Modi and Trump* (New Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2018).

The United States envisions securing stronger ties with an India that has access to energy, investment, and markets. Furthermore, there is a growing willingness on the part of the United States to “co-produce and co-develop major security systems” together¹¹ and even grant sophisticated defense technology to India. Both India and the United States have enhanced their partnership on multilateral platforms, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) between India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, which has emerged as an important forum for discussing critical challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. Though India is not a formal alliance partner of the United States, their bilateral relations have acquired the flavor, although not the substance, of ties between allies. India is confident in pursuing a closer partnership with the United States by deftly applying its multi-alignment strategy. While various alignments are being utilized to address the shortfalls of a formal alliance, the functional nature of these alignments allows India to pursue security cooperation both in concert with the United States and independently of it. India's ties with the United States certainly represent a sophisticated stage in the evolution of its multi-alignment approach and are, therefore, significant.

During the G20 summit in New Delhi in September 2023, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) was unveiled to supplement existing maritime and road transport routes connecting India to Europe. Washington appears to be promoting IMEC as a counter to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and it may also be viewed as the continuation of the Abraham Accords, which sought to normalize relations between Israel and the Gulf states.¹² It should be noted that the I2U2 minilateral between India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States also showcases the depth of India-U.S. cooperation.

American willingness to strengthen India's military capabilities and support its potential leadership role in the Indo-Pacific marks a significant moment in Washington's relations with New Delhi. However, alongside increasing cooperation and coordination, some friction points between India and America persist. First, India's reluctance to align with America's strategy of isolating Russia and Iran on the global front remains an irritant. Second, the way in which the United States manages India-Pakistan tensions remains a point of contention. Finally, the West holds differing views on the contentious political issue of minority rights and democratic dissent in India, an issue that has long been debated in liberal Western media. It is often overlooked, however, that despite both being liberal democracies that share many political beliefs and institutions, Indian and

¹¹ David Vergun, “U.S., India Rapidly Expand Their Military Cooperation,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, June 20, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3433245/us-india-rapidly-expand-their-military-cooperation/>.

¹² Jean-Loup Samaan, “The India-Middle East Corridor: a Biden Road Initiative?,” *Atlantic Council*, October 6, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/the-india-middle-east-corridor-a-biden-road-initiative/>.

Western societies interpret certain political values rather differently. For instance, while both value freedom of speech, the social boundaries of this freedom show a contrasting image in India and the United States.

In essence, it can be argued that the India-U.S. relationship is characterized by a delicate balance between shared strategic interests and divergent perceptions. This balance will depend heavily on how the China problem is perceived and handled by the national security establishments in New Delhi and Washington, as China remains the primary driver in promoting strategic convergence between the two nations. As long as Washington remains convinced that the United States must build a stronger partnership with India—not only because India is the world’s largest democratic polity but also because this partnership is the sole credible military balancer against China in the current international order—India-U.S. ties will overcome all normative challenges.

China

The India-China relationship is characterized by a historical chain of conflicting events, which has taken on a new dimension amidst recent geopolitical tensions between the two countries. The long-standing boundary dispute intensified with India’s defeat in the 1962 war, resulting in China’s occupation of Aksai Chin. After several decades, it seemed possible to envision Sino-Indian tensions evolving into a more amicable state of affairs. However, in recent years, India has emerged as a more assertive player when it comes to countering the growing Chinese interference in the Indian Ocean region. This is evident in its opposition to the Belt and Road Initiative, its more active role in the Quad, and its withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2017.

As India’s External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, has pointed out, India-China relations have been in an “abnormal state” since the 2020 Galwan military clashes.¹³ The sudden military incursion by Chinese forces shattered the hope of ensuring long-term peace along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between the two nuclear-armed neighbors. This became a major event, as there had been no combat fatalities on the India-China border since 1975.¹⁴ While China urged the Indian government that the settlement of the contentious boundary issue should not influence bilateral trade ties,¹⁵ New Delhi repeatedly clarified that relations

¹³ PTI, “India’s Ties with China ‘Abnormal’ Due to Violation of Border Management Agreements by Beijing: Jaishankar,” *The Hindu*, April 29, 2023, www.thehindu.com/news/national/indias-ties-with-china-abnormal-due-to-violation-of-border-management-agreements-by-beijing-jaishankar/article66792248.ece.

¹⁴ Ananth Krishnan, “Torture, Not Firing, behind China Border Deaths in 1975, Recalls Veteran,” *The Hindu*, September 21, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/torture-not-firing-behind-china-border-deaths-in-1975-recalls-veteran/article32654100.ece>.

¹⁵ PTI, “Boundary Settlement Process Should Not Stall Ties with India: China,” *The Economic Times*, January 19, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/boundary-settlement-process-should-not-stall-ties-with-india-china/articleshow/106996296.cms>.

with China could not return to normal as long as Beijing continues to build up forces along the border with India. Essentially, India has emphasized the principle of “linkage” – the idea that there can be no progress on issues of interest to China unless there is progress on issues of interest to India, including the peaceful resolution of the boundary dispute. India has begun to convey unambiguously that Xi Jinping cannot expect to reap the advantages of booming economic relations with India while seeking to take advantage of military tensions on the border.

Beijing has leveraged its ties with Islamabad, utilizing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as part of President Xi Jinping’s dream project—the Belt and Road Initiative—to secure access to the Indian Ocean. The increasing military presence of Chinese naval ships in the Indian Ocean poses a critical threat to India. China continues to deepen its influence in India’s neighborhood by exerting political pressure on Bhutan and building closer ties with sections of the political elites in Nepal, Myanmar, and the Maldives.¹⁶ India’s Foreign Minister has recently acknowledged China’s attempts to influence India’s neighboring countries by deploying additional resources to shape regional dynamics in its favor but advised India not to “be scared of competition” because “global politics is a competitive game” in which one should be prepared to outwit the competitor.¹⁷

Struggle for Leadership of Global South

The G20 summit in New Delhi, held in 2023 under India’s chairmanship, demonstrated New Delhi’s ambition to emerge as a leader of the Global South. The term “Global South” refers to the vast majority of developing countries, primarily located in South and Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America – the geographical South. Adopting different strategies and approaches, India and China consider themselves leaders of the Global South and have long competed for influence over these nations.¹⁸ The primary motivating force behind India’s involvement in BRICS was to generate pressure for the democratization of the global economic architecture. However, this objective is increasingly under strain as China seeks to position BRICS as an alternative to the U.S.-led political and economic institutions. Despite India’s reservations about BRICS’ recent expansion, China

¹⁶ Deep Pal, “China’s Influence in South Asia: Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 13, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/13/china-s-influence-in-south-asia-vulnerabilities-and-resilience-in-four-countries-pub-85552>.

¹⁷ “China Will Influence Our Neighbourhood, India Shouldn’t Be Scared of Competition: EAM Jaishankar,” *The Telegraph online*, January 30, 2024, www.telegraphindia.com/world/china-will-influence-our-neighbourhood-india-shouldnt-be-scared-of-competition-external-affairs-minister-s-jaishankar/cid/1997218.

¹⁸ Andrew F. Cooper, “China, India and the Pattern of G20/BRICS Engagement: Differentiated Ambivalence between ‘Rising’ Power Status and Solidarity with the Global South,” *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 9 (2021): 1945-1962, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1829464>.

has been working on a strategy to make BRICS geopolitically anti-Western in outlook.¹⁹

India is particularly concerned about China's potential dominance within BRICS and its tactical maneuvers to secure a prominent global platform for advancing Beijing's ambitions. Furthermore, China has persistently opposed India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and has resisted India's calls for the expansion of the United Nations Security Council.²⁰ Given these dynamics, it would be advantageous for the United States and the G7 to support India in its role as the leader of the Global South.

Implications of Ukraine War: The Russia Factor

A cornerstone of Indian foreign policy is that the country's leadership cannot be dictated by major powers when defining its national interests. India has often accorded great priority to maintaining strong political relations with Russia. There is still considerable goodwill in India regarding the crucial role played by the Soviet Union during the India-Pakistan war of 1971 when New Delhi desperately needed protection against China's potential military intervention on behalf of Pakistan. The Soviet Union helped India by deterring China and providing much-needed military supplies while using its veto power in favor of India at the UN Security Council.²¹ As a result, India's pursuit of a friendly relationship with Russia was initially driven by a shared rivalry with China. In the post-Cold War era, as Russia began to normalize relations with China, India found it difficult to reduce its dependence on Russia to balance against China. This continued dependence is one of the key factors driving India's Russia dilemma.

Even today, the Cold War legacy of a deeper India-Soviet defense partnership remains evident. India's refusal to compromise its strategic partnership with Russia over the war in Ukraine should be seen as a continuation of its foundational non-aligned vision, now rebranded as "strategic autonomy." While India's steadily closer relations with the United States over the last two decades have significantly undermined the enthusiasm of those attached to the dogmatism of "non-alignment," there remains a group of die-hard Indian conservatives who believe that the Indo-U.S. joint pursuit of a new Asian balance of power would

¹⁹ Neil Melvin, "Building Up the BRICS: An Emerging Counter-West Order?" *The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)*, August 25, 2023, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/building-brics-emerging-counter-west-order>; Joseph Cotterill, James Kynge, and Michael Pooler, "China Urges BRICS to Become Geopolitical Rival to G7," *Financial Times*, August 20, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/40f7cd4d-66f2-4e4d-876d-a0c7aa7097e1>.

²⁰ Geeta Mohan, "China Blocked India's Bid for Membership at UN Security Council, NSG: S Jaishankar," *India Today*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/china-blocked-india-s-bid-for-membership-at-un-security-council-nsg-s-jaishankar-1763679-2021-01-28>.

²¹ Nivedita Kapoor and Tanvi Madan, "Why India Cares about China-Russia Relations," *Brookings*, January 10, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-india-cares-about-china-russia-relations/>.

severely damage India's "strategic autonomy," implying its long-standing partnership with Russia. Meanwhile, India's freedom to simultaneously maintain friendly ties with both Russia and the United States has grown increasingly constrained amid the escalating tensions between Washington and Moscow. For example, during the Trump presidency, the U.S. administration even contemplated imposing sanctions on India for its purchase of the S-400 missile defense system from Russia, though this idea was ultimately abandoned.²²

Many in the West are displeased with India for taking advantage of Western sanctions on Russia by increasing its purchase of Russian oil. Some Western leaders have misinterpreted this as India indirectly financing Russia's war against Ukraine,²³ overlooking the crucial fact that India lacks the financial resources to compete with the West's ability to pay higher prices for energy. As the world's third-largest energy consumer, India heavily depends on imports for most of its energy needs. This pragmatic pursuit of self-interest, a characteristic feature of Indian foreign policy, has led New Delhi to remain neutral on the war in Ukraine, refraining from directly condemning Russia.

Since the war began in March 2022, New Delhi has abstained from almost every UN resolution related to Ukraine. While India has not explicitly criticized the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it has condemned the Bucha massacre²⁴ and also expressed concern over the nuclear rhetoric from Russian leaders. Many in the West are unaware of the extent of India's military dependence on Russian weapons, nor do they fully understand India's desire to avoid Russia's isolation in the international system. These complex factors have discouraged India from alienating Russia.

India relies on Russia for essential components of many weapons systems, including fighter aircraft, nuclear submarines, and land warfare platforms, continuing its dependence on Russian technology and maintenance. However, Russia's share in India's arsenal has decreased as New Delhi has expanded arms trade with the United States and France while investing heavily in domestic arms production.²⁵ The war in Ukraine has further prompted India to diversify its sources of weapons, as Russia struggles to meet its own requirements due to the punitive sanctions. The Indian military is reportedly disappointed with Russia's military performance on the Ukrainian battlefields. Long delays in the delivery of critical military supplies from Russia have also become a significant issue for all

²² Raj Verma, "India-US-Russia Dynamics in the Trump Era," *India Review* 22, no. 2 (2023): 172-183, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2023.2180920>.

²³ Chintamani Mahapatra, "India's Approach to the War in Ukraine," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 16, no. 2 (2021): 95-108.

²⁴ Krishna N. Das, "India Condemns Killings in Ukraine's Bucha in Apparent Hardening of Stance," *Reuters*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india-condemns-killings-ukraines-bucha-apparent-hardening-stance-2022-04-05/>.

²⁵ Krishn Kaushik, "India Pivots Away from Russian Arms, but Will Retain Strong Ties," *Reuters*, January 29, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-pivots-away-russian-arms-will-retain-strong-ties-2024-01-28/>.

branches of the Indian military. In particular, the delivery of the indigenous, licensed manufacture of Russian Kalashnikov AK-203 rifles is now delayed beyond March 2024.²⁶ To explore alternatives, India's Ministry of Defense approved the procurement of 73,000 Sig Sauer assault rifles from the United States in December 2023. Similarly, the delivery of two Project 1135.6M Admiral Grigorovich-class guided missile frigates and the leasing of a follow-on Project 971 Akula (Schuka-B)-class nuclear-powered submarine for the Indian Navy have been postponed from early 2024 to early 2025.

New Delhi and Moscow hold an annual summit at the highest political level, with alternating visits of the Indian Prime Minister and the Russian President. However, following the war in Ukraine, Putin did not travel to New Delhi for the annual summit in 2022. Citing a "busy schedule," Putin also skipped the G20 Summit in New Delhi, with Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov attending the summit on his behalf. In December 2023, it was the Indian Prime Minister's turn to visit Russia for the annual summit. Yet, Modi did not undertake the visit, resulting in the summit's cancellation for the second consecutive year. Instead, Foreign Minister Jaishankar was sent on a five-day visit to Moscow to meet with Russian leaders.

While Modi's decision to forgo the visit to Russia signals to the West that India is mindful of their concerns, Jaishankar's trip may have been viewed as a message to Moscow that India has not abandoned its traditional strategic partner under Western pressure. After his party's victory in the 2024 general elections, Modi resumed office as Prime Minister. In a surprisingly bold move, he made a high-profile visit to Moscow in July to hold the 22nd India-Russia annual summit, raising eyebrows in the West. During his talks with Putin, Modi remarked that a solution to the Ukraine conflict was not possible on the battlefield, as peace cannot be reached amidst bombs, guns, and bullets.²⁷ From Moscow, Modi proceeded directly to Austria, which reflected India's extraordinary diplomatic efforts to position itself as a genuine peacemaker.

India's desire to preserve its ties with Russia cannot be interpreted as indifference to the violence in Ukraine. After famously reminding President Putin on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in September 2022 that "today's era is not the era for war,"²⁸ Prime Minister Modi assured Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky during the G7 Summit in May 2023 that

²⁶ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "India's Russia Defense Gambit," *The Diplomat*, January 5, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/indias-russia-defense-gambit/>.

²⁷ Hindu Bureau, "Modi in Russia Highlights: PM Departs for Austria after Fruitful Two-day Visit," *The Hindu*, July 11, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pm-narendra-modi-russia-visit-putin-talks-live-updates-july-9-2024/article68383655.ece>.

²⁸ Dan Bilefsky and Mujib Mashal, "Russian Invasion of Ukraine: India's Leader Tells Putin That Now Is Not an Era for War," *The New York Times*, September 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/09/16/world/ukraine-russia-war>.

India would do “everything it can” to help bring peace to Ukraine.²⁹ In August 2024, Modi undertook a historic visit to Kyiv, the first by an Indian Prime Minister since Ukraine became a sovereign country in 1991. Modi’s long train journey from Warsaw to Kyiv to meet President Zelensky has been regarded as extraordinary. It inserted India into Europe’s quest for peace, demonstrated India’s determination to play an active role in reshaping the global order following the Ukraine war, and revived India’s lost bonds with Ukraine.³⁰

From the Western point of view, India’s strong ties with Russia position New Delhi as an honest peace broker between Russia and Ukraine, primarily due to deep-rooted Western mistrust towards China and Russia’s hostile attitude towards the United States. However, regardless of the role New Delhi chooses in a peace effort, it can be argued that India would continue to frustrate Western capitals in their attempts to persuade New Delhi to join the anti-Russia coalition. As Foreign Minister Jaishankar pointed out, “I would still like to see a more rules-based world, but when people start pressing you in the name of a rules-based order to give up, to compromise on what are very deep interests, at that stage, I’m afraid it’s important to contest that.”³¹

As previously mentioned, India’s relationship with China has been tense, particularly because of China’s occupation of significant Indian territory and occasional border clashes intended to pressure Indian leadership. New Delhi needs its friendship with Moscow as a counterbalance to Beijing, and thus, India’s core national interest lies in rejecting Russia’s complete international isolation, which could drive Moscow even closer to Beijing. Moreover, India would like to see Russia’s position as a great power more or less intact, as this may facilitate New Delhi’s push for a more multipolar international order.

However, India’s task of managing these dynamics is likely becoming considerably more complicated. If New Delhi’s unwillingness to dilute or downgrade its traditional partnership with Moscow dampens American enthusiasm to invest more political capital to court India, it would directly embolden China to pursue expansionist ambitions in the region without fear of being jointly countered by the United States and India. Therefore, while India and Russia may strive to maintain closer ties, their geopolitical priorities will continue to evolve in different directions. A key factor that could loosen their political ties is the absence of a common threat; India has no common adversary with Russia.

²⁹ Happymon Jacob, “Can India Bring Russia and Ukraine to the Table? What New Delhi’s Diplomacy Can and Cannot Achieve,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 2, 2023, www.foreignaffairs.com/india/can-india-bring-russia-and-ukraine-table.

³⁰ C. Raja Mohan, “Why Modi’s Visit to Ukraine Marks Three New Roads: India in Europe, Diplomatic Space, and Delhi-Kyiv Revival,” *The Indian Express*, August 24, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-global/modi-visit-ukraine-9529875/>.

³¹ Roger Cohen, “Russia’s War Could Make It India’s World,” *The New York Times*, December 31, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/31/world/asia/india-ukraine-russia.html>.

India's Stance on U.S.-China Strategic Competitions

Taken together, trends such as India-China boundary tensions, North Korea's military muscle-flexing, a looming trade war between the United States and China, China's maritime disputes with the Philippines, Vietnam, and Japan, as well as Beijing's increased land reclamation efforts in the South China Sea and the construction of military installations, point in a troublesome direction.³² Different countries in South and Southeast Asia view China from various perspectives, shaped by factors such as geography, history, and trade ties. However, the multiplicity of India's bilateral relationships in the region also has the potential to contribute positively to India-U.S. ties.

India has been on the receiving end of China's attempts to suppress its will to defend its territory and safeguard its economic interests. As India's foreign minister has repeatedly articulated, ensuring economic prosperity at home, maintaining peace on the borders, and enhancing India's influence abroad are among the most important strategic priorities for Indian policymakers. The United States plays a key role in all levels of India's strategy. Geopolitically, India shares a common interest with the United States in limiting China's aggressiveness. Over the years, India has increasingly viewed the United States as indispensable in building its strategic capabilities and maintaining a balance of power in Asia. It is worth noting that the current level of Indo-U.S. friendliness has emerged against three key developments: rising tensions between the United States and China, growing alignment between Russia and China, and the tightening embrace between China and Pakistan.

Therefore, India's strategic coordination with the United States in the Indo-Pacific is set to increase. Similarly, growing outreach from many European countries to India is seen as beneficial in terms of building sustainable partnerships in defense, technology, trade, and investment. Moreover, India will continue to resist attempts by China and Russia to turn BRICS into an anti-Western geopolitical grouping. However, if strategic competition is framed in overly ideological terms, India has little to offer to the West. While it is understandable that Washington needs to emphasize the ideological nature of the conflict between Western and Chinese political values, the American worldview of liberal democracy has limited appeal in New Delhi.

The decline of U.S. supremacy, coupled with the gradual abdication of its global leadership, presents many disadvantages for India. The twin failures of the United States in state-building projects in Iraq and Afghanistan, along with the widespread perception of its disengagement from parts of West and Central Asia, may have created an impression of Washington's inability or unwillingness to intervene on India's behalf in a potential boundary crisis with China. In a zero-sum, anarchical system, China's assertive rise triggers strategic anxieties in both

³² Center for Preventive Action, "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea," Council on Foreign Relations, updated September 17, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>.

Washington and New Delhi. Unsurprisingly, existing coalitions are being repurposed, and new ones are being formed to contain China's quest for Asian dominance, even though the variety of interests, preferences, and strategies among various foreign policy actors pose obstacles to the emergence of a cohesive multilateral security architecture.

New Delhi may still acquire certain strategic advantages in the emerging multipolar world. Before the Biden administration sought to restore a semblance of normalcy in transatlantic ties, the Trump administration had shaken the confidence of many American allies by adopting a more transactional approach to international diplomacy. Since India has never been a treaty partner of the United States, New Delhi appears comfortable doing business with the United States on transactional terms. Consequently, Trump's potential return to the White House could provide India with greater leverage over American strategic priorities. New Delhi, eager to benefit from the advanced U.S. military hardware without compromising its strategic autonomy, will likely welcome a request to shoulder more burdens with Japan and Australia in maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Partnering with the United States holds immense promise for India's security interests, particularly in New Delhi's strategy to counter China's economic and military rise in its vicinity. Without fully aligning with the American agenda vis-à-vis China, India has been working to ensure a strong and sustainable U.S. presence in Asia. It is also important to understand that if India's military edge over China along the Himalayan borders erodes due to China's deployment of similar Russian-made weapon systems, New Delhi will likely intensify its search for more technologically advanced weapon systems from Western countries. This could lead to a deeper military-technical partnership between India and the United States in the long term.

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Strategic Competition in the Indo-Pacific: Between Constraint and Co-optation

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Abstract: The Indo-Pacific is one of the most consequential regions in the world. Its demographic and economic trends make it a pivotal engine for global economic growth. At the same time, various ethnic, territorial, and maritime disputes in the region threaten to destabilize not only individual states and the region but also the international system. Against this backdrop, the Sino-American strategic competition adds another layer of complexity to regional dynamics, bringing with it several opportunities but also significant challenges. Consequently, how this competition evolves will have global repercussions. This study explores the role of the Indo-Pacific in the broader Sino-American strategic competition and assesses the perceptions and interests of key regional actors. The author argues that these actors are exercising their agency in ways that constrain or co-opt the Sino-American strategic competition to further their interests. Conclusions are made that this challenges the emergent Cold War 2.0 discourse, which envisions Washington and Beijing forming two coherent blocks vying for influence, by revealing the region's complex realities.

Keywords: strategic competition, Indo-Pacific, ASEAN, India, agency.

Introduction

Strategic competition has become a central feature of U.S.-China bilateral relations over the past decade. This competition is multifaceted, encompassing security, economic, and ideological dimensions. The Indo-Pacific is particularly central to this rivalry, as it is the region where the divergences on these issues are most acutely felt. States in the region have primarily responded with policies

aimed at constraining or co-opting the efforts of the two powers, seeking to avoid “choosing sides.”¹ In other words, clear alignment remains an exception.

In many regards, the Sino-American strategic competition has driven Washington’s adoption and promotion of the Indo-Pacific construct in recent years.² This regional construct, linking the polities of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, represents the most economically dynamic region in the world, contributing around two-thirds of global growth in 2023.³ It is also home to the largest emerging consumer markets, further accentuating its prominent role as an economic engine for the foreseeable future.⁴ The region’s economic centrality is further illustrated by the fact that 60 % of global maritime trade passes through its sea lanes and choke points.⁵ However, this economic centrality is contrasted by several enduring security challenges. Many of these critical sea lanes and choke points are situated in contested waters, such as the East and South China Seas. Additionally, longstanding territorial disputes—such as those involving Kashmir, Taiwan, and the Koreas—engage nuclear-armed actors, posing risks not only to regional stability but also to the broader international system. In other words, regional dynamics in the Indo-Pacific have far-reaching global implications. Consequently, strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific will impact both regional and global affairs.

While Sino-American competition has played—and will continue to play—a significant role in shaping the Indo-Pacific, key regional actors also possess the capacity to influence how this competition unfolds. The exercise of their agency reveals that these states have actively sought to constrain or co-opt the Sino-American strategic competition to advance their own interests. Consequently,

¹ Drew Thompson, “Don’t Make Us Choose Sides: Southeast Asian Perspectives on U.S. Strategy and Presence in the Region,” *Centre on Asia and Globalisation (National University of Singapore)*, March 2024, 1-13, https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/cag/don't-make-us-choose-sides_march2024.pdf; David C. Kang, “Still Getting Asia Wrong: No ‘Contain China’ Coalition Exists,” *The Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (2022): 79-98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2022.2148918>.

² Bibek Chand and Zenel Garcia, “Constituting the Indo-Pacific: Securitisation and the Process of Region-Making,” *International Quarterly for Asian Studies* 52, no. 1-2 (2021): 15-34, <https://doi.org/10.11588/iqas.2021.1-2.14300>.

³ “Regional Economic Outlook Asia and Pacific: Challenges to Sustaining Growth and Disinflation,” *International Monetary Fund*, October 2023, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/APAC/Issues/2023/09/27/regional-economic-outlook-for-asia-and-pacific-october-2023>.

⁴ Homi Kharas and Wolfgang Fengler, “Which Will Be the Top 30 Consumer Markets of This Decade? 5 Asian Markets below the Radar,” *Brookings*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/which-will-be-the-top-30-consumer-markets-of-this-decade-5-asian-markets-below-the-radar/>.

⁵ See: “How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?” *China Power*, January 25, 2021, <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>; Darshana M. Baruah, Nitya Labh, and Jessica Greely, “Mapping the Indian Ocean Region,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 15, 2023, 1-51, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/06/mapping-the-indian-ocean-region>.

rather than a purely top-down dynamic where great powers like the United States and China compete for influence through a combination of inducements and coercion, the region also exhibits a bottom-up dynamic that enables, and sometimes limits, the ability of these powers to dominate. To illustrate these processes, the author presents cases demonstrating how local actors have effectively constrained or co-opted the Sino-American competition to pursue their national objectives.

Constraining Strategic Competition

Perhaps no other actor in the Indo-Pacific has been as invested in constraining Sino-American strategic competition as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). While dissenting voices exist within, particularly given ASEAN's diverse membership and consensus-based approach, key actors like Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia have sought to use the institution as a means to mitigate what they view as the destabilizing effects of strategic competition in Southeast Asia. This is unsurprising, considering that ASEAN's founding was partly motivated by efforts to limit external interference during the Cold War, a goal that remains central to the organization's *raison d'être*.⁶ In the current context of Sino-American strategic competition, these key states have worked to use ASEAN to "enmesh" the United States and China within the region's broader economic and security architecture. Additionally, they have sought to create overlapping partnerships to prevent bloc formation, which could undermine ASEAN's cohesion and centrality.

ASEAN's strategy of *omni-enmeshment* "refers to the process of engaging with a state so as to draw it into deep involvement into international or regional society, enveloping it in a web of sustained exchanges and relationships, with the long-term aim of integration."⁷ The goal is for member states to avoid having to take sides by involving all great powers in the region's affairs and transforming them into stakeholders of its stability.⁸ Examples of this omni-enmeshment predate the emergence of Sino-American strategic competition and include initiatives such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). These groupings originated from ASEAN efforts to bring together extraregional powers with security and economic interests in Southeast Asia.⁹ As

⁶ "The ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration)," *Association for Southeast Asian Nations*, Bangkok, August 8, 1967, <https://agreement.asean.org/media/download/20140117154159.pdf>.

⁷ Evelyn Goh, "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (Winter 2007/2008): 113-157, 121, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2008.32.3.113>.

⁸ Goh, "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia," 121-122.

⁹ See: "About the East Asia Summit," *East Asia Summit*, <https://eastiasummit.asean.org/about-east-asia-summit>; "About APEC: What is Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation?" *Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation*, updated January 2024, www.apec.org/about-us/about-apec.

the strategic competition between Washington and Beijing has intensified, ASEAN states have continued to rely on this strategy, broadening it by actively participating in initiatives led by the rival powers.

ASEAN's participation in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) exemplifies its strategy of omni-enmeshment. Member states have actively engaged in various BRI economic corridors and infrastructure projects. For instance, the BRI's China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor connects China's Yunnan and Guangxi provinces with Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore through highways, economic development zones, and an emerging network of high-speed railways. Similarly, the BRI's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road links multiple key ports in mainland China with Southeast Asian ports and associated free trade zones.¹⁰ Many ASEAN states view these BRI initiatives as complementary to their national and regional development goals. Thus, ASEAN and China have worked to synergize regional connectivity efforts. Existing ASEAN mechanisms—such as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), the ASEAN-Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC), the Ayeyawady Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), and the Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA)—are now linked to the BRI.¹¹ Through these collaborative efforts, China has emerged as ASEAN's most significant economic partner.

At the same time, several ASEAN members have joined Washington's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) in an effort to ensure economic diversification. While some ASEAN states view the IPEF as part of Washington's strategy to counterbalance China's economic influence in the region, they assess their participation in IPEF as complementary to existing initiatives like the BRI and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The latter is spearheaded by ASEAN, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.¹² The IPEF's focus on supply chain resilience, transparency, and trade standards aligns with the region's broader efforts to foster economic growth.

¹⁰ Zenel Garcia and Phillip Guerreiro, "What American Policymakers Misunderstand About the Belt and Road Initiative," *Parameters* 54, no. 2 (Summer 2024): 7-20, <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.3284>.

¹¹ "ASEAN-China Joint Statement on Synergising the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)," *Association for Southeast Asian Nations*, November 3, 2019, 3, <https://asean.org/asean-china-joint-statement-on-synergising-the-master-plan-on-asean-connectivity-mpac-2025-and-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>.

¹² Siwage Dharma Negara and Maria Monica Wihardja, "IPEF's Relevance for ASEAN," *Fulcrum*, September 19, 2023, <https://fulcrum.sg/aseanfocus/ipefs-relevance-for-asean/>; "Speech by PM Lee Hsien Loong at Nikkei's 27th International Conference on the Future of Asia," *Prime Minister's Office Singapore*, May 26, 2022, <https://pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-at-the-27th-International-Conference-on-the-Future-of-Asia>.

These efforts illustrate ASEAN states' non-discriminatory approach toward initiatives from Washington and Beijing, using them as mechanisms to simultaneously mitigate strategic competition between the two powers while achieving national and regional development goals. To this end, they continue to pursue the omni-enmeshment strategy in regard to the two rivals by supporting Beijing's bid to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which Washington abandoned in 2016, and by facilitating U.S. trade with the RCEP free trade agreement. This strategy also reflects efforts to create overlapping partnerships that avoid the formation of rigid blocs, preserving ASEAN's centrality. In a 2022 speech at Nikkei's 27th International Conference on the Future of Asia, former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (2004-2024) highlighted this approach. He acknowledged that while it is natural for countries in the region to develop closer ties with either the U.S. or China, "most countries would prefer not to be forced to choose."¹³ Lee argued that "there would be no good outcome if Asian countries are split between two camps" and advocated for a "more stable, less tense configuration" where the two powers "have overlapping circles of friends."¹⁴ Lastly, he cautioned against forming "alliances and groupings of like-minded partners" such as the Quad and AUKUS, emphasizing that collective security should involve "engagement and confidence and trust building arrangements with potential adversaries."¹⁵

Lee's sentiments are reflected in the broader Southeast Asia region. As indicated in *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report*, there is growing concern that ASEAN is becoming an arena for major power competition, and its members may be forced to become proxies in this process.¹⁶ Consequently, there is a rising desire to strengthen the resilience of the organization and to maintain its position of not taking sides in the U.S.-China strategic competition.¹⁷ It is clear that Southeast Asians view ASEAN's strategy of omni-enmeshment as a key mechanism for ensuring the region's centrality.

ASEAN centrality requires the organization to act as a bridge-builder by promoting inclusive and complementary groupings while also taking the lead in shaping regional norms. This is evident in the introduction of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019, which was a direct response to the increasing number of Indo-Pacific strategy white papers by the United States, Japan, and

¹³ "Speech by PM Lee Hsien Loong at Nikkei's 27th International Conference on the Future of Asia."

¹⁴ "Speech by PM Lee Hsien Loong at Nikkei's 27th International Conference on the Future of Asia."

¹⁵ "Speech by PM Lee Hsien Loong at Nikkei's 27th International Conference on the Future of Asia."

¹⁶ "The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report," *ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute*, 2024, 14, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/centres/asean-studies-centre/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/the-state-of-southeast-asia-2024-survey-report/>.

¹⁷ "The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report," 47.

Australia. The objective was to reframe the conceptualization of the Indo-Pacific construct away from Sino-American strategic competition and instead focus on ASEAN's priority areas, such as connectivity and sustainable development.¹⁸ In fact, the AOIP explicitly states that ASEAN considers the Indo-Pacific a "region of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry."¹⁹ Importantly, the AOIP positions the organization as the nexus of the Indo-Pacific region by highlighting key ASEAN-led initiatives, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), and emphasizing its critical role in any viable Indo-Pacific strategy developed by extraregional powers.²⁰

While scholars and practitioners often criticize ASEAN as being ineffective, particularly regarding key strategic issues such as the South China Sea disputes and the situation in Myanmar, the organization's track record is more complex.²¹ Discursive and empirical analyses have demonstrated that ASEAN has adeptly played the role of a "regional conductor" and has shown a capacity to shape great power interests in the region.²² Even in a critical issue like the South China Sea, where ASEAN has arguably fallen short in securing the interests of its members, it has established a precedent by compelling China to "recognize the bloc's role as a legitimate dispute manager."²³ This achievement is significant, given Beijing's preference for bilateral mechanisms in dispute resolution. Consequently, while Washington and Beijing may seek to draw various Southeast Asian states into their respective spheres of influence as their strategic competition intensifies, they must contend with ASEAN's continued efforts to enmesh them within the broader regional architecture. At the same time, ASEAN positions itself as a pivotal actor in the Indo-Pacific. In essence, ASEAN aims to constrain Sino-American strategic competition to safeguard the interests of its members.

¹⁸ "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," *Association of Southeast Asian Nations*, June 22, 6, 2019, https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf.

¹⁹ "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific."

²⁰ "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific."

²¹ John Lee, "ASEAN Is a Danger to Itself and the Neighborhood," *Commentary*, Hudson Institute, March 9, 2024, <https://www.hudson.org/international-organizations/asean-danger-itself-neighbourhood-australia-john-lee>; Joshua Kurlantzick, "ASEAN's Complete Failure on Myanmar: A Short Overview," Council on Foreign Relations, August 29, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/aseans-complete-failure-myanmar-short-overview>.

²² Le Hu, "Examining ASEAN's Effectiveness in Managing South China Sea Disputes," *The Pacific Review* 36, no. 1 (2023): 119-147, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2021.1934519>; Robert Yates, "ASEAN as the 'Regional Conductor': Understanding ASEAN's Role in the Asia-Pacific Order," *The Pacific Review* 30, no. 4 (2017): 443-461, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2016.1264458>.

²³ Hu, "Examining ASEAN's Effectiveness in Managing South China Sea Disputes."

Co-opting Strategic Competition

Despite ASEAN's efforts to constrain Sino-American strategic competition, it is evident that other key actors have sought to co-opt this rivalry to further their own interests. In this context, few other states have benefitted more than India. As the United States and key allies, such as Australia and Japan, promote the transition from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific regional construct as a form of threat management vis-à-vis China, they explicitly acknowledge India's pivotal role in the region.²⁴ Thus, the Indo-Pacific construct not only reflects the increasingly interconnected polities of the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions but also demonstrates how strategic competition fosters role recognition—one that states like India find vital to their national interests. Consequently, the promotion of the Indo-Pacific construct, itself a product of Sino-American strategic competition, serves to legitimize India's historic claims to regional power status. However, this recognition goes beyond simply acknowledging power status; it is a recognition of India's geopolitical and geoeconomic role within the broader regional framework.

This dynamic is exemplified in official statements from American, Australian, and Japanese officials discussing the Indo-Pacific regional construct. For instance, in 2018, former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Alex N. Wong, discussing the Indo-Pacific Strategy, stated that the construct "acknowledges the historical reality and the current-day reality that South Asia, and in particular India, plays a key role in the Pacific, East Asia, and Southeast Asia." He added that it was in the "U.S. interest, as well as the interests of the region, for India to play an increasingly weighty role in the region."²⁵ Similarly, Australia's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper echoes American views, referring to India as "the pre-eminent maritime power among Indian Ocean countries" and encourages New Delhi's strategic engagement with East Asia and the United States.²⁶ Meanwhile, Japan, which has been a leading proponent of the Indo-Pacific construct since the mid-2000s, views India as an "indispensable partner" in ensuring a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific."²⁷ While these statements are not exhaustive, they illustrate how the promotion of the Indo-Pacific construct has legitimized India's regional power status, granting it a measure of centrality – not only within the Indian Ocean Region, a position India has historically claimed, but also within the broader Indo-Pacific region.

²⁴ Chand and Garcia, "Constituting the Indo-Pacific: Securitisation and the Process of Region-Making."

²⁵ Alex N. Wong, "Briefing on the Indo-Pacific Strategy," *U.S. Department of State*, April 2, 2018, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/briefing-on-the-indo-pacific-strategy/>.

²⁶ "2017 Foreign Policy White Paper," Australian Government, 2017, quote on p. 42, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/minisite/static/4ca0813c-585e-4fe1-86eb-de665e65001a/fpwhitepaper/index.html>.

²⁷ Fumio Kishida, "The Future of the Indo-Pacific – Japan's New Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo Pacific' – 'Together with India, as an Indispensable Partner'," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 20, 2023, p. 12, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/pc/page3e_001336.html.

This recognition increasingly facilitates New Delhi's efforts to strengthen political, economic, and security ties with other sub-regions in the Indo-Pacific, particularly Southeast Asia. Since the 1990s, India has pursued these goals through its "Look East" policy, which was initially focused on enhancing economic relations with ASEAN. By 2003, the Look East policy was expanded to include East Asia and Australia, and its scope was further extended to incorporate security cooperation.²⁸ However, these efforts had limited results. Therefore, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi came into office in 2014, he announced the Act East policy.²⁹ While some view it as a simple rebranding of its predecessor, it is clear that Modi has sought to capitalize on Sino-American strategic competition as a means to deepen India's engagement with the broader Indo-Pacific region.

Despite ongoing challenges, the new policy has made tangible progress compared to its predecessor.³⁰ As China has displaced U.S. economic influence in the region, countries have sought new partners to diversify their economies. While India's influence in Southeast and East Asia remains modest, it has made measurable progress in becoming an economic player in those sub-regions. Moreover, due to New Delhi's lack of territorial disputes with Southeast and East Asian countries, coupled with its ambition for a larger security role, India has also made significant strides in strengthening security ties across the region.³¹ In other words, New Delhi has been able to effectively leverage strategic competition to its advantage.

New Delhi's co-optation of Sino-American strategic competition extends beyond deepening its geopolitical and geoeconomic centrality in Southeast and East Asia. It also plays a significant role in India's efforts to achieve a similar effect in the Middle East and Europe. Due to territorial disputes with China and Pakistan, India lacks natural land routes to European markets. As a result, India, Iran, and Russia signed an agreement in 2000 to establish the International North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC).³² This agreement spurred India's interest in investing in Iran's Chabahar port, developing it into a deep-sea port that would

²⁸ Thongkholal Haokip, "India's Look East Policy: Its Evolution and Approach," *South Asian Survey* 18, no. 2 (2011): 239-257, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971523113513368>.

²⁹ Arijit Mazumdar, "From 'Look East' to 'Act East': India's Evolving Engagement with the Asia-Pacific Region," *Asian Affairs* 52, no. 2 (2021): 357-374, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2021.1912467>.

³⁰ Mazumdar, "From 'Look East' to 'Act East': India's Evolving Engagement with the Asia-Pacific Region"; Chietigj Bajpae, "Reinvigorating India's 'Act East' Policy in an Age of Renewed Power Politics," *The Pacific Review* 36, no. 3 (2022): 631-661, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2110609>.

³¹ "Prime Minister's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 1, 2018)," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, June 1, 2018, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>.

³² Harsh V. Pant, "India-Iran Cooperation at Chabahar Port: Choppy Waters," *CSIS Briefs, Center for Strategic & International Studies*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/india-iran-cooperation-chabahar-port-choppy-waters>.

serve as a key node in the proposed corridor.³³ Indian investment since 2016 has led to the development of several terminals at Chabahar and some utilization of the NSTC. However, Iran and Russia's status as sanctioned states has undermined the corridor's viability. Chabahar currently operates below capacity due to concerns from potential customers and investors about secondary sanctions from the United States.³⁴ Although India successfully lobbied the United States to exempt its investment in Chabahar port from sanctions—a clear example of the pivotal role India plays in the American Indo-Pacific strategy—it is increasingly evident that the port and the NSTC will not serve as a viable entry point to European markets in the foreseeable future.³⁵ As a result, New Delhi has turned its attention to the proposed India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).

The IMEC, announced on the sidelines of the G20 meeting in New Delhi in 2023, is one of the key corridors that are part of the Biden Administration's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII).³⁶ It is also a crucial element in Washington's broader effort to promote alternatives to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as their strategic competition intensifies. The IMEC consists of two primary corridors: the first is an east corridor connecting India to the Arabian Gulf, and the second is a northern corridor linking the Arabian Gulf to Europe. This initiative connects India to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, and ultimately to Europe.³⁷ In essence, the IMEC addresses New Delhi's longstanding efforts to establish a reliable land route to European markets. While the IMEC is still in its early stages, it is clear that India plays a vital role in its formulation and implementation, thus granting it greater centrality in the Indo-Pacific region.

³³ Sudha Ramachandran, "India to Invest in Iran's Chabahar Port," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, November 26, 2014, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13099-india-to-invest-in-irans-chabahar-port.html>.

³⁴ "Chabahar Port Capacity Remains Largely Untapped," *Financial Tribune*, September 6, 2019, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/99758/chabahar-port-capacity-remains-largely-untapped>.

³⁵ Alberto Rizzi, "The Infinite Connection: How to Make the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor Happen," *European Council on Foreign Relation*, April 23, 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-infinite-connection-how-to-make-the-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor-happen/>; Harsh V. Pant and Prithvi Gupta, "Chabahar, Port of a Smart Call," *Observer Research Foundation*, May 16, 2024, www.orfonline.org/research/chabahar-port-of-a-smart-call.

³⁶ "Fact Sheet: President Biden and Prime Minister Modi Host Leaders on the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment," The White House, September 9, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/09/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-prime-minister-modi-host-leaders-on-the-partnership-for-global-infrastructure-and-investment/>.

³⁷ "Memorandum of Understanding on the Principles of an India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor," *The White House*, September 9, 2023, www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/09/memorandum-of-understanding-on-the-principles-of-an-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor/.

As Sino-American strategic competition intensifies, India's regional profile and influence have grown. The transition from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific regional construct reflects this reality, as highlighted by official statements and white papers from its proponents. New Delhi has successfully co-opted this regional transformation to strengthen political, economic, and security ties, thereby enhancing its centrality in South, Southeast, and East Asia. Moreover, India's efforts in the International North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) further illustrate its ability to leverage Sino-American strategic competition to establish a viable land route to Europe. In the case of the NSTC, New Delhi utilized its strategic role in Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy to secure exemptions from sanctions on its investments in Iran. Similarly, with IMEC, India has capitalized on its market and economic potential to position itself as a viable alternative to China.

Conclusion and Implications

The two cases discussed above are by no means exhaustive. Nevertheless, they offer a glimpse into the various responses to Sino-American strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific. There is no uniformity in these responses. More importantly, there is no desire among key regional stakeholders to settle on a clear alignment with either the United States or China. Instead, they are actively pursuing strategies that either constrain or co-opt the competition between the two powers.

While individual ASEAN member states approach the competition in various ways, it is evident that its major players have made constraint a core strategy for the organization. Despite legitimate concerns about Chinese activities in the South China Sea and the unease over economic dependence on Beijing, ASEAN has maintained its omni-enmeshment policy with the United States and China. In this context, proposals from either rival are not viewed through a zero-sum lens but as complementary. In other words, Chinese investment may facilitate American investment and vice versa.

Although this behavior is often described as hedging, it could be argued that this strategy goes beyond merely avoiding taking sides. As indicated earlier, ASEAN aims to establish centrality in the region and play the role of regional conductor. The organization seeks to be a key player in shaping the Indo-Pacific strategies of any extraregional power.

India's strategy more closely aligns with co-optation. While it may appear that India has clearly aligned with the United States, this alignment is largely confined to its stance vis-à-vis China as opposed to a broader set of strategic interests. In essence, India benefits from the role it has been ascribed by the United States and its regional partners without having to compromise on other priorities. This is most clearly illustrated by India's continued investments in the Chabahar port and the International North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) despite Iran and Russia being under heavy U.S. sanctions. Additionally, this dynamic is evident in New Delhi's position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as

its ongoing purchase of vast quantities of Russian oil despite Washington's criticisms. In fact, New Delhi has largely disregarded U.S. objections precisely because it understands the central role it plays in Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy.

The implication of these cases is that key actors in the Indo-Pacific are shaping the outcome of Sino-American strategic competition through their actions. While both the United States and China may desire clearer alignment from their respective partners, these actors have exercised agency in ways that complicate such neat demarcations. These states make choices that sometimes align with the preferences of one rival, as seen in India's participation in the IMEC, but at other times, they defy those preferences, as exemplified by ASEAN's efforts to maintain its centrality without taking sides.

Ultimately, the idea of a "Cold War 2.0" with rigid, opposing blocs is therefore overstated. Local agency plays a crucial role, and many Indo-Pacific states, having experienced the worst excesses of Cold War competition, are unlikely to seek a repeat of that history.

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Research Article

Navigating the Trilemma of (In)security: Strategic Competition in the Black Sea Region

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Abstract: This article explores the geopolitical and geostrategic importance of the Black Sea region within the complex dynamics of major-power competition, focusing primarily on the interests and strategies of the United States, China, Russia, and other regional players. It highlights the region’s major threats and challenges, ranging from military threats and hybrid operations to socio-economic and ecological concerns. These multifaceted challenges are leveraged by key stakeholders to advance their interests, further complicating the strategic landscape. This complex geopolitical environment, fraught with risks and competition, underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play. The article introduces the concept of strategic trilemmas in the Black Sea region, involving the active participation of Türkiye, Ukraine, and pro-Western littoral states (Romania, Bulgaria, and Georgia) on one side, with Russia on the opposing side. Addressing the region’s challenges requires a comprehensive approach to promote stability, security, and cooperation. While Russia’s influence remains a concern, the potential for reducing its dominance and increasing cooperation in the Black Sea region offers bilateral and multilateral collaboration opportunities in this crucial geopolitical theater.

Keywords: geopolitics, strategic competition, strategic trilemma, military threats, Black Sea region, European Union, United States, China, Russia, Türkiye.

Introduction

The Black Sea region (BSR) has consistently held a prominent position in global geopolitics, geoeconomics, and strategic considerations. Positioned at the crossroads of diverse civilizations—particularly the Christian and Muslim worlds—and between East and West, North and South, it is fraught with multifaceted risks across political, economic, and military dimensions.¹ Furthermore, the BSR serves as a focal point for intense geopolitical competition among key regional and global actors.

At the same time, this phenomenon arises from a fundamental geographical feature of the BSR. Specifically, the region offers strategic opportunities for maritime powers while serving as a launching point for continental powers seeking dominance in southeastern Europe. When under the control of hostile forces, the Black Sea has the potential to disrupt any hegemonic Eurasian power or coalition. Consequently, the two major Eurasian challengers—Russia and China—are more inclined to cooperate rather than compete within the BSR.

The strategic importance of this region cannot be overstated, as it serves as a theater for strategic competition among leading regional players and global powers. These diverse stakeholders harbor distinct, often conflicting interests, which, on the one hand, complicate the situation in the broader Black Sea area. On the other hand, this very competition lays the groundwork for regional coexistence and, in certain areas, cooperation and integration within the global sphere. Examples of such integration initiatives include the Euro-Asian transport corridor and Caspian energy projects, which involve the participation of China, Central Asia, and European countries.

Shifting U.S. strategic priorities have increasingly centered on major-power competition. However, there is no comprehensive framework for elucidating the nature of U.S. competition with China and Russia. In the BSR context, the lack of a comprehensive framework for understanding major-power competition among the United States, China, and Russia has significant implications. The region's intricate geopolitical landscape, characterized by multifaceted risks and diverse stakeholders, highlights the urgency of developing a nuanced analytical approach. Such a framework should not only encompass the interests and strategies of these global powers but also examine how they interact and compete within this vital theater of geopolitical rivalry.²

The BSR's unique position as a crossroads between various civilizations and a hub of intense competition demands a deeper understanding of the dynamics at

¹ Daniel Hamilton and Gerhard Mangott, eds., *The Wider Black Sea Region in the 21st Century: Strategic, Economic and Energy Perspectives* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2008), 2-11, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/wps/ctr/0016283/f_0016283_14081.pdf.

² Seth Cropsey, George Scutaru, Harry Halem, and Antonia Colibasanu, *Strategic Nexus: The Black Sea, Great Power Competition, and the Russo-Ukrainian War* (Yorktown Institute, New Strategy Center, 2023), 12, https://newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/YI_NSC_Monograph.pdf.

play. Moreover, as strategic competition intensifies in this region, it becomes imperative for policymakers and analysts to develop comprehensive models that accurately capture and assess these interactions and their implications for regional stability and security.

The United States actively seeks to bolster its BSR presence through a series of measures, including military exercises, support for NATO allies like Romania and Bulgaria, and various initiatives aimed at counterbalancing Russia's influence. Meanwhile, despite its geographical remoteness, China is increasingly involved in the region's economic development. This involvement includes investments, infrastructural projects, and trade agreements aimed at securing access to vital energy resources and expanding its Belt and Road Initiative into Europe. As stakes in this strategic competition continue to rise, the BSR emerges as a pivotal arena where the interests and ambitions of these global actors converge, with profound implications for the region's security and stability.

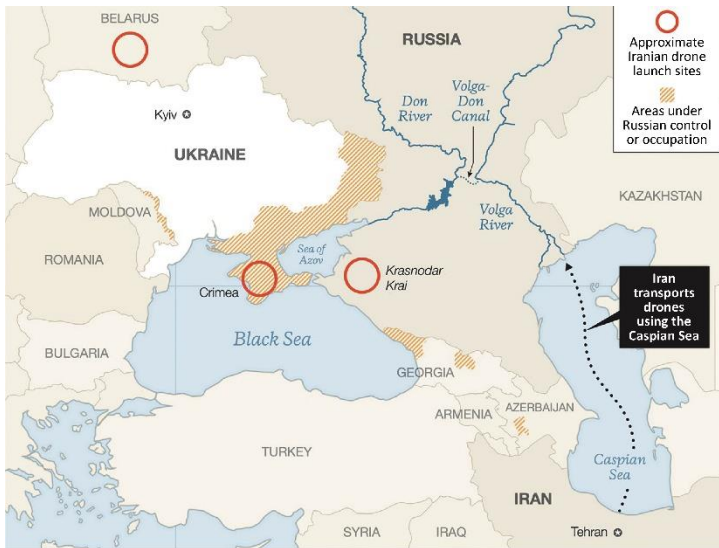


Figure 1: Map of the Black Sea (Source: Hudson Institute, 2023).³

Therefore, achieving a sustainable equilibrium in managing the Russian threat over the long term requires establishing a mechanism that fulfills several key criteria. First, this mechanism must effectively empower Ukraine to defend itself by enhancing its defensive capabilities. Second, it should facilitate close co-

³ Luke Coffey and Can Kasapoğlu, "A New Black Sea Strategy for a New Black Sea Reality," Policy Memo (Hudson Institute, February 2023), <https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/new-black-sea-strategy-new-black-sea-reality>.

ordination of defense efforts between Ukraine and its neighboring NATO partners, regardless of Ukraine's formal membership in the alliance. Third, it must provide a clear trajectory toward gradually reducing direct economic and military burdens on the United States.

The proposed solution to address these conditions involves implementing a triangular balancing mechanism (*strategic trilemma*) within the BSR. This mechanism would include the participation of Ukraine, Türkiye, and pro-Western littoral states such as Romania, Bulgaria, and Georgia on one side, with Russia on the opposing side. Positioned as a pivotal player, Türkiye holds a unique role within this construct. It acts as a staunch defense partner to Ukraine, serves as a cornerstone of NATO's maritime presence in the Black Sea, and maintains a complex, multifaceted relationship with Russia characterized by elements of rivalry, trade, and diplomacy.

However, the strategic trilemma implies that achieving all three objectives simultaneously may prove challenging. It requires balancing and prioritizing these interests, with the understanding that optimizing one aspect may come at the expense of another. The implementation of a triangular balancing mechanism involving Türkiye, Ukraine, pro-Western littoral states, and Russia aims to navigate these complex trade-offs. Türkiye's pivotal role in this framework—given its relationship with Russia and staunch defense partnership with Ukraine—is crucial in managing this strategic trilemma. Ultimately, the strategic trilemma reflects the complex calculus faced by global and regional powers in managing their interests within the Black Sea region, where achieving a balanced approach among these three core objectives remains an ongoing challenge.

Major Threats and the State of Play in the Black Sea Region

When analyzing the implications of strategic competition and strategic trilemmas from the perspective of stakeholders in the BSR, it is crucial to emphasize the various threats and challenges that jeopardize regional security. In this context, threats refer to the capabilities immediately available to potential adversaries, which can be used to exploit existing vulnerabilities. As a result, the region's vulnerabilities, if not addressed, can undermine the region's capacity to respond effectively to current and emerging threats. Additionally, these threats can trigger a range of risks and challenges, including the direct consequences of the conflict in Ukraine and the indirect repercussions from conflicts such as the one in Gaza. Notably, threats and challenges are multifaceted, encompassing military, socio-economic, and environmental dimensions.

Given the current situation, the Black Sea region has experienced a range of military threats and activities, mainly driven by Russian aggression. These include the occupation of Crimea and parts of Eastern Ukraine, the militarization of the Crimean Peninsula and the occupied territories of Georgia and Moldova, as well as the establishment of an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) network in the region. Notably, airstrikes are considered decisive in naval warfare due to the high

vulnerability of naval formations to missile attacks, underscoring the necessity for robust air and missile defense systems.

The deployment of Russian naval forces, particularly the Black Sea Fleet, presents a significant security challenge for the region's coastal states. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a clear pattern of continuous militarization of the Black Sea has emerged. Moreover, when examined from a strategic standpoint, the potential for high-intensity combat operations to be conducted simultaneously across the entire Black Sea is a critical consideration. Furthermore, given the capabilities of modern ships, the theater of military operations can extend into adjacent seas—such as the Mediterranean, Azov, or Caspian Seas—including through the involvement of coastal capabilities.⁴

In addition, it is evident that potential military threats exhibit a multifaceted nature, characterized by both horizontal and vertical dimensions of conflict escalation. This is accompanied by the intensification of hybrid operations and the use of new technologies as tools for gaining asymmetric advantages.

The BSR weaponization is closely linked to the potential escalation of conflicts, as previously mentioned, primarily due to the illegal military presence of the Russian Federation in the region. This includes its activities on the territories of independent states and the control exerted over occupied and separatist entities such as Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. It is important to note that the assessment of the “illegal” nature of Russia's military presence in these regions can vary depending on the perspective and interpretation of the geopolitical context. However, the international community and various organizations have expressed concerns and called for the withdrawal of Russian troops on multiple occasions. Despite these calls, the risk of re-escalation of so-called frozen conflicts remains significant. This situation suggests the possibility of the conflict spreading horizontally, potentially drawing in other countries with interests in the region and triggering a broader regional confrontation.

At the same time, in the context of the militarization of the BSR, Russia's intention to establish a maritime base in Abkhazia (a Georgian territory effectively controlled by Russia since the 2008 Russo-Georgian War) could threaten Georgia's status as a key hub for east-west global connectivity. The establishment of such a maritime base could further consolidate Russia's military presence in the region, indirectly entangling Georgia in potential conflicts or escalating tensions between Georgia and its allies. As a result, the risk of vertical escalation cannot be disregarded, referring to the possibility of an increase in conflict intensity or the involvement of higher-level actors, such as the European Union (EU) or NATO. This could lead to direct military confrontations between Russia and other

⁴ Florin Nistor and Lucian-Valeriu Scipanov, “The Influence and Characteristics of the Black Sea on Joint Operations,” *Impact Strategic* 80, no. 3 (2021): 24-35, 28, <https://doi.org/10.53477/1842-810X-21-11>. – in Romanian

global powers. Additionally, it is worth noting that the European Union has expressed significant concern regarding Russia's reported plans to establish a permanent naval base for its Black Sea Fleet in the breakaway region of Abkhazia.⁵

Indeed, Russia's approach to contemporary warfare is based on multi-domain operations aimed at undermining adversaries' ability and will to resist. Within this framework, the nuclear narrative employed by Putin's regime as part of its preemptive defense doctrine cannot be overlooked. There is no consensus regarding the use of nuclear weapons for intimidation; however, some experts argue that Russia has integrated these "conventional precision weapons and nuclear weapons into a single strategic weapon set," lending credence to the view that Russia may be prepared to employ, or threaten to employ, nuclear weapons in a regional or large-scale war.⁶ In practice, Russia has turned nuclear weapons into an offensive tool to influence international agendas and regional politics. At the same time, nuclear rhetoric is used to intimidate and instill fear in populations within the countries Russia refers to as its "near abroad." However, there are no guarantees that this tool will not be used as a weapon if Russia feels vulnerable or unable to achieve a victory in war.

In the realm of hybrid operations, it is evident that not only their intensity but also the array of tools employed can increase. Hybrid warfare encompasses a blend of conventional military strategies, irregular warfare, cyber warfare, and information warfare. The escalation of hybrid operations signifies a potential shift toward more diverse and nuanced forms of aggression by Russia, as demonstrated in its actions in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and possibly other countries.

Considering the complex nature of hybrid operations, the rapid advancements in technology, particularly the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI), could play a crucial role in military domains as a tool for achieving asymmetric advantages. Within the context of the evolving geopolitical landscape shaped by technological advancements and strategic competition, AI is emerging as a key instrument for dominance in both the economic and military arenas.

The growing cyber insecurity, often used as a tool for hybrid operations, is a notable trend in the realm of information and disruptive technologies. Cyber challenges, such as Russian cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure, issues in digitization processes, increased disinformation campaigns, and the weaponization of information, are growing concerns. Both state and non-state actors utilize these tactics to destabilize political systems, influence public opinion, and disrupt democratic processes in the region. This trend is further demonstrated by

⁵ EEAS Press Team, "Georgia: Statement by the Spokesperson on the Intention of Russia to Establish a Naval Base on Georgia's Internationally Recognised Territory," *European Union External Action*, October 6, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/georgia-statement-spokesperson-intention-russia-establish-naval-base-georgia%E2%80%99s-internationally_en.

⁶ Mary Beth D. Nikitin, "Russia's Nuclear Weapons: Doctrine, Forces, and Modernization," CRS Report R45861 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, April 21, 2022), 40, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45861/16>.

continuous interference in elections across various countries in 2024, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Moldova, and Georgia.

Socio-economic challenges in the BSR are multifaceted, with the primary trend being the erosion of good governance. Issues such as corruption, fragile governance frameworks, and economic disparities have hindered the region's development. Additionally, dependence on remittances from migrant workers and vulnerability to economic sanctions exacerbate these challenges.

Ecological issues, such as pollution and overfishing, threaten the fragile ecosystem of the Black Sea. These concerns have implications not only for the environment but also for regional stability, as disputes over resource management could exacerbate existing tensions.

Given all these challenges, the principal stakeholders strategically exploit the region's vulnerabilities to advance their respective interests. The intricate interplay among competing actors significantly impacts the BSR's strategic landscape, regional security, and the broader geopolitical framework. As these influential entities actively engage in rivalry to assert their influence and dominance in the Black Sea, the region's significance within the larger context of international relations continues to grow.

Security Trilemmas and Global Players' Interests in the Black Sea Region

The BSR is a dynamic geopolitical arena where global and regional powers converge with distinct interests and strategies. Four overarching characteristics define this complex landscape. Firstly, it reflects the competing interests and strategic objectives of major global powers, each vying for influence and dominance within the region. Secondly, the BSR exhibits a unique coexistence of interests among various regional powers, whose alignments may shift or diverge depending on specific contextual factors and evolving circumstances. Thirdly, the region grapples with a persistent undercurrent of crises and conflicts stemming from the ongoing confrontation between major global powers and regional actors. This discord significantly contributes to an environment of inherent instability and uncertainty. Finally, amidst these challenges, instances of cooperation emerge in select policy domains and among specific actors, offering glimpses of hope and the potential for collaboration.

Within this intricate geopolitical setting, identifying the security trilemmas faced by players in the BSR represents an interesting turning point. It seeks to unravel the complex trade-offs and strategic dilemmas that shape the decision-making processes of both regional and global actors as they navigate this multifaceted landscape. In doing so, this article sheds light on the challenges and opportunities inherent to the BSR, offering insights into the dynamics that govern the interactions among major and regional powers in pursuit of their respective objectives.

The intricate interplay of interests among key regional and global actors is characterized by a set of mutually exclusive yet interrelated priorities. The trilemma revolves around the core interests of Ukraine, Türkiye, Russia, China, and the political West (comprising the United States, NATO, and the European Union), each pursuing distinct but overlapping goals within the Black Sea region.

For Ukraine, the trilemma consists of three central imperatives. First, it seeks to restore its 1991 statehood, including maritime sovereignty. Second, Ukraine aims to enhance its defensive capabilities to effectively deter potential future Russian aggression. Third, it aspires to achieve long-term economic viability. All three objectives are grounded in the resilience demonstrated by Ukrainian society.⁷ Balancing these priorities is essential for Ukraine's security and prosperity within the region.

Türkiye, another pivotal actor, faces its own trilemma. Its first objective is to keep Russia sufficiently weakened but not disintegrated, ensuring that Russia remains a manageable neighbor. Second, Türkiye seeks to exert control over the Black Sea, closing it off to extra-regional powers while establishing itself as the dominant regional player. However, this goal may come at the expense of maintaining close ties with the West, particularly NATO. These objectives underscore Türkiye's complex role in the strategic trilemma.

Russia, on the other hand, grapples with its own multifaceted trilemma. Its primary interest lies in securing a "victory," or at least a Ukrainian defeat, while avoiding the risks of collapse or political instability within Russia. Simultaneously, Russia seeks to undermine the unity of Western countries while forging stronger bonds with former Soviet republics. Navigating these priorities requires a delicate balance to safeguard Russia's strategic interests.

China's strategic trilemma in the Black Sea region revolves around three core objectives. First, it seeks to uphold the principle of a unitary sovereign state, emphasizing its "One China" mantra. Second, China aims to support Russia geopolitically as a strategic counterweight to the United States without escalating tensions to the point of direct confrontation. Third, China strives to maintain and expand its global economic presence, particularly through the "Middle Corridor" and Trans-Caspian routes, which provide alternative avenues for its economic expansion via the Black Sea region.

The political West confronts its own trilemma. Its primary objective is to support the statehood of BSR countries established in 1991. At the same time, it aims to prevent both Russian escalation and internal disintegration while providing non-NATO security assurances to the region.

⁷ Victoria Vdovychenko, "Shaping up Social Resistance: Zelenskyy's Approach to Rearranging Ukraine," in *Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Presidency and the Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War*, ed. Adam Reichardt and Tomasz Stępniewski, IES Policy Papers 8/2022 (Lublin, Poland: Institute of Central Europe, 2022), 55-64, https://ies.lublin.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ies_policy_papers_no_2022-008.pdf.

In essence, the strategic trilemma highlights the intricate and dynamic nature of the BSR's geopolitical landscape, where key actors must navigate their conflicting priorities and objectives to achieve a balance. This ongoing challenge reflects the complex calculus regional and global powers face as they manage their interests within this strategically significant area.

In light of these trilemmas, the security dynamics within the BSR are likely to be significantly influenced by the emerging or reinvigorated strategic interests of global powers such as the United States and China. In the context of the BSR, the United States pursues a multifaceted set of strategic objectives. First, it aims to ensure the successful implementation of Caspian energy projects, thereby providing Europe with alternative energy sources, particularly oil and gas. These efforts are strategically designed to bypass Russian territory and exclude Iran from participating in such projects. Notable examples of U.S. support for these initiatives include backing infrastructure projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, as well as the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) and Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) projects. The United States actively champions these energy initiatives and remains open to furthering similar endeavors.

Additionally, the United States puts a premium on maintaining a limited military presence in the Black Sea region. It currently operates military bases and facilities in countries such as Türkiye, Bulgaria, and Romania, and plans to continue providing military assistance to Ukraine as a deterrent against Russian aggression. Furthermore, the United States maintains a modest military contingent in Georgia as part of NATO's training mission, with the overarching goal of enhancing the capabilities of the Georgian Defence Forces. Complementing its energy and military interests, the United States takes measures to support socio-economic development, education, and the strengthening of democratic institutions and the rule of law in countries within the Black Sea region. These efforts are designed to reinforce state institutions and safeguard the sovereignty of BSR states.

Conversely, China is actively working to expand its influence within the BSR. This effort is primarily evident through China's concerted actions to increase trade cooperation with regional states. China's formal free trade agreement with Georgia is a notable development in this context.⁸ Additionally, China is advancing integration processes as part of its One Belt-One Road initiative, initially proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013.⁹ This initiative aims to foster economic connectivity through extensive infrastructure development, thereby underlining

⁸ Nika Chitadze, "ENC Analysis – Geopolitical Interests of China in the South Caucasus: The Example of China-Georgia Relations," *European Neighbourhood Council*, August 31, 2021, <http://encouncil.org/2021/08/31/enc-analysis-geopolitical-interests-of-china-in-the-south-caucasus-the-example-of-china-georgia-relations/>.

⁹ "Belt and Road Initiative," World Bank, March 29, 2018, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/regional-integration/brief/belt-and-road-initiative>.

China's unwavering commitment to strengthening its role in the region. In parallel, China is deepening its trade collaboration with Russia, a move intended to mitigate the impact of sanctions imposed by the democratic community on the Kremlin regime. This economic engagement also helps sustain Russia's military operations in Ukraine.

In light of the aforementioned factors, it is crucial to emphasize that the United States' simultaneous provision of military and economic support to Ukraine, combined with sanctions imposed on Russia, contrasts sharply with China's proactive pursuit of economic and trade cooperation with Russia. This dynamic intensifies the competition between the United States and China within the BSR. Additionally, Chinese initiatives in transportation under the One Belt-One Road project—particularly the potential involvement of BSR countries—have raised significant concern in Washington. Of particular note is China's expressed interest in controlling strategic infrastructure in the region, such as the under-construction Anaklia port on Georgia's Black Sea coast.

Simultaneously, it is noteworthy that the nature of the transport and economic projects mentioned above—particularly those designed to bypass Russian territory, such as the China-Central Asia-Caucasus-Turkey-Europe railway—creates a potential for an alignment of interests between the United States and China in the strategically pivotal Black Sea region. This alignment could manifest as increased cooperation between Europe and China, fostering greater economic integration between China and Western nations.

In sum, the Black Sea region serves as a theater where both the United States and China actively pursue a diverse array of strategic objectives, including energy diplomacy, military presence, socio-economic development, and trade expansion. These strategic endeavors are central to the policies of both nations within the region, and their interactions and competitive dynamics have profound implications for the security, stability, and broader geopolitical landscape of the BSR and the global context.

Conclusion

The BSR remains a dynamic and complex geopolitical arena shaped by global powers' competing interests and strategies. This article has explored the key characteristics that define the region: the coexistence of interests among regional powers, ongoing crises and conflicts, and occasional instances of cooperation. These characteristics have given rise to positioning trilemmas for all actors involved in the region.

The BSR's complex geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape continues to evolve, shaped by the strategic interests of key players. This dynamic is defined by '4 Cs':

- Competing interests and strategies of major powers;
- Coexistence of interests among certain regional powers;

- Continuous crises and conflicts arising from confrontations between major and regional powers; and
- Cooperation in select policy areas, as well as between certain actors at both horizontal and vertical levels.

These dynamics contribute to the positioning trilemmas faced by all actors in the BSR.

In summary, the BSR remains a critical arena for both strategic competition and cooperation among major global powers. Navigating the challenges and opportunities within this complex geopolitical landscape requires a comprehensive approach to fostering stability, security, and collaboration among all stakeholders. As the region's significance continues to grow, a deep understanding of the dynamics at play is essential for policymakers and analysts alike. Consequently, the expansive Black Sea area will continue to be a subject of paramount importance in global politics. Given its position at the crossroads of civilizations, the developments within the strategically vital Black Sea region will have a significant impact on the global socio-economic and political landscape.

Disclaimer

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A Divided Arctic: Is an Ice Curtain Emerging?

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Abstract: The era of Arctic exceptionalism has ended, bringing uncertainty to a region with tremendous strategic and economic potential. With Finland and Sweden joining the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance, the Arctic faces an unprecedented division: around half of the Arctic aligns under the NATO flag, while the other half remains Russian. Climate change is a critical factor driving regional activity, and the warming trends are affecting the region's economic development, infrastructure, and military activity. With Western sanctions blocking technological and economic cooperation with Russia, China is well-positioned to fill the gap. The "no limits" friendship between Russia and China facilitates increased Chinese investment and presence in a region historically wary of non-Arctic states. This article will examine how climate factors enable both the strengthened ties among like-minded Western Arctic nations and the growing relationship between Russia and China to assess whether a new "ice curtain" is emerging as strategic competition intensifies in the Arctic.

Keywords: Arctic, security, strategic competition, climate, Russia, China.

Introduction

In recent years, the Arctic (Figure 1) has received an unprecedented level of attention due to its precarious position at the intersection of changing climate, economic, geopolitical, and security dynamics. Climate change remains the primary strategic driver, opening the region to new economic opportunities while also posing significant regional security challenges. Once known for peace, stability, and its hostile, inaccessible environment, the Arctic is now at the forefront of security discussions. As multiple trends converge in the High North, the Arctic is emerging as a new hotspot in an era of strategic competition after decades of regional cooperation.



Figure 1: The Arctic (Source: NOAA Arctic Report Card with author’s edits, <https://arctic.noaa.gov>).

Climate trends remain a key driver of regional activity, with the Arctic warming at a rate likely four times faster than the global average.¹ The region is being transformed by climate events and increased extreme weather phenomena, leading to significant coastal erosion, permafrost thaw, and ice melt. This fragile ecosystem is undergoing rapid changes as air, water, and land temperatures rise. Alongside these challenges, however, warming trends are also creating new opportunities in the region.

Long ice-covered and largely inaccessible, the Arctic is believed to hold trillions of dollars worth of natural resources, including significant supplies of oil,

¹ Mika Rantanen, Alexey Karpechko, Antti Lipponen, Kalle Nordling, Otto Hyvärinen, Kimmo Ruosteenoja, Timo Vihma, and Ari Laaksonen, “The Arctic Has Warmed Nearly Four Times Faster Than the Globe since 1979,” *Communications Earth & Environment* 3 (2022), article 168, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-022-00498-3>.

gas, and rare earth elements essential for fueling the green energy transition. Its potential as a maritime corridor for trade and undersea cables—through which international data and financial transactions flow—could also be worth billions.² Climate change is increasing access to this maritime domain, enabling the discovery and exploitation of previously inaccessible natural resources. In the decades ahead, the world’s navies may utilize these strategic corridors to uphold national security interests or transit between the world’s oceans, as Russian warships currently do. Both Arctic and non-Arctic states are looking northward with new strategic approaches, investments, and partnerships.³

Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine effectively cut Western financial and diplomatic ties in the Arctic region. Even long-standing cooperation through the Arctic Council came to a halt during Russia’s Chairmanship. Nevertheless, Russia depends heavily on developing its Arctic zone’s abundant natural resources to sustain economic growth. With Western partnerships now out of reach, Russia has turned to China to fill the looming gap in the Arctic. Under the “no-limits” friendship declared between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin, the two nations have intensified their cooperation in the region.

The return to great power politics is intensifying the desire among competing states to establish interests in the Arctic region. The erosion of the cooperative spirit that has defined the region over the past three decades could have a profoundly negative impact on Arctic governance, scientific collaboration, environmental protection, and sustainable development. Indeed, the emergence of an ice curtain—nearly eighty years after Churchill’s famous declaration of an iron curtain descending across Europe—will particularly hinder cooperation in critical areas such as understanding climate change, preserving fragile ecosystems, and protecting the environment from unscrupulous resource extraction practices. This situation may also adversely affect Indigenous communities in the region, limiting dialogue and collaboration in the circumpolar Arctic. Most concerning, the militarization of the region could reach new heights – a dangerous prospect given the lack of mechanisms for dialogue and deconfliction. The Arctic security dilemma that has already taken root may continue to escalate as Western nations seek to counterbalance Russian militarization and a nascent Sino-Russian Arctic partnership.

However, the emergence of an ice curtain between the Western, like-minded Arctic nations and a Russian-Chinese Arctic partnership is not a foregone conclusion. In fact, the relationship between China and Russia is one of necessity, rooted in mutual suspicion and distrust. Additionally, the Western Arctic-7 nations have divergent approaches to the region, which policy differences in Washington could further amplify. The Arctic sub-regions exhibit vast differences in

² The Northern Sea Route and Northwest Passage.

³ There are eight Arctic states: Canada, Kingdom of Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russian Federation, Sweden, and the United States. The five Arctic coastal states are: Canada, Kingdom of Denmark (Greenland), Norway, Russian Federation, United States.

climate, population, economic development, and security infrastructure. The needs of the European High North contrast sharply with those of the North American Arctic, and national policies reflect these distinctions. Sustainable economic development, environmental protection, and the avoidance of security dilemma dynamics are top priorities for European capitals. The European Union has prioritized the Arctic, emphasizing economic development, environmental regulations, and community engagement in the European High North. While European Arctic capitals recognize the threat posed by Russia, their approach to China differs from that of Washington. Nevertheless, the recent enlargement of NATO shifts the Alliance's security focus northward, and the unity displayed among the Arctic-7 has been notable thus far. We are undoubtedly on the cusp of a significant geopolitical divide in an era marked by strategic competition and polycrisis – even in a region that has generally been on the periphery of geopolitical conflict.

Climate Trends – A Strategic Enabler

To develop a comprehensive understanding of Arctic security, it is essential to identify the critical drivers of regional strategic trends. The warming Arctic climate is the primary catalyst for increased interest, activity, and transformation within the region. This article adopts the most common definition of the Arctic, identifying it as the area north of the Arctic Circle (66.5 degrees North) while acknowledging that other definitions exist based on factors such as temperature, forest line, permafrost, ice coverage, population, and political boundaries. Further, each Arctic sub-region has unique characteristics, including economic activity, population density, military presence, weather patterns, ice coverage, temperature fluctuations, ocean currents, and ecosystems. Although this article will address the Arctic as a single region, it does so with an awareness of the substantial differences among its sub-regions.

Scientific observations and data consistently show that the Arctic is warming significantly faster than the global average, largely due to a phenomenon known as Arctic amplification. Recent studies using multiple observational datasets indicate that the Arctic has been warming nearly four times faster than the global average over the past 43 years.⁴ Several factors contribute to Arctic amplification, including oceanic heating and the ice-albedo effect resulting from diminished ice coverage. While snow and ice reflect a portion of the sun's energy, areas lacking ice absorb more energy, leading to further warming and amplifying existing trends. The loss of sea ice is one of the primary mechanisms driving Arctic amplification, as supported by climate models and observations.⁵ However, regional warming varies across different Arctic sub-regions. For example, trends

⁴ Rantanen et al., "The Arctic Has Warmed Nearly Four Times Faster."

⁵ Rantanen et al., "The Arctic Has Warmed Nearly Four Times Faster."

suggest that the Eurasian sector of the Arctic—especially around Novaya Zemlya—may be warming as much as seven times faster than the global average (Figure 2).⁶

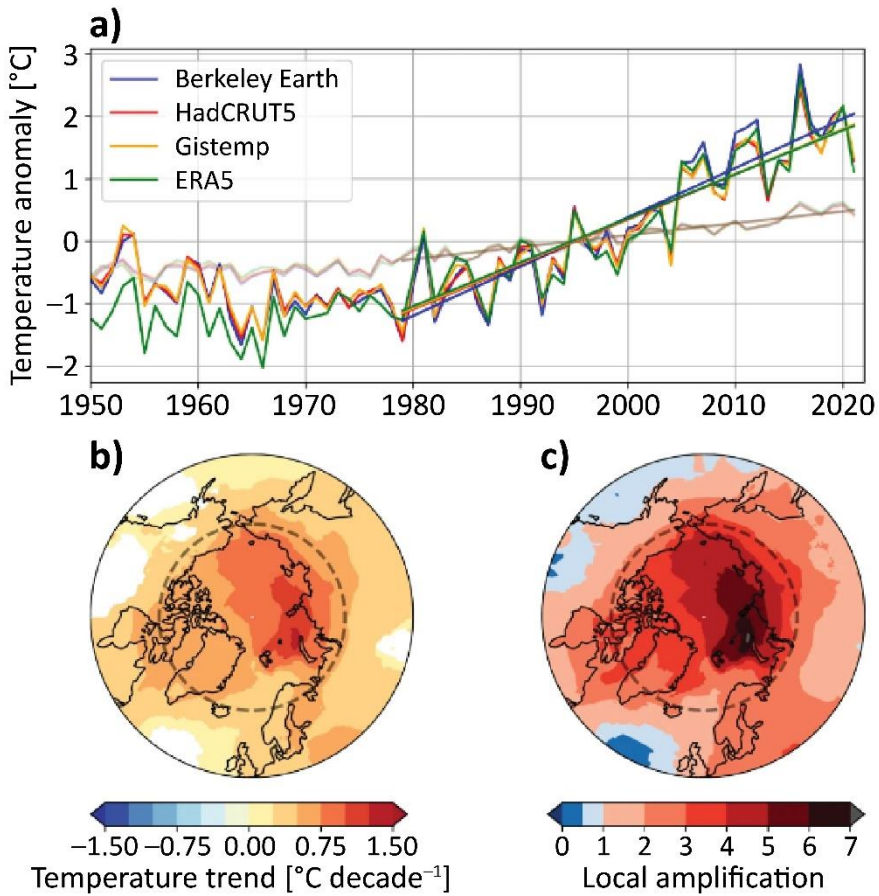


Figure 2: Annual mean temperature evolution in the Arctic: a) Annual mean temperature anomalies in the Arctic (66.5°–90°N) (dark colors) and also displayed are the linear temperature trends for 1979–2021; b) Annual mean temperature trends for the period 1979–2021, derived from the average of the observational datasets; c) Local amplification ratio calculated for the period 1979–2021, derived from the average of the observational datasets.⁷

According to the 2023 NOAA Arctic Report Card—a leading annual assessment of the region—the Arctic is becoming “increasingly warmer, less frozen,

⁶ Rantanen et al., “The Arctic Has Warmed Nearly Four Times Faster.”

⁷ Rantanen et al., “The Arctic Has Warmed Nearly Four Times Faster.”

and wetter, with regional extremes in weather, climate patterns, and ecosystem responses.”⁸ Phenomena like Arctic tsunamis, boreal forest fires, permafrost thaw, disruptive storms, and tundra greening are increasingly common in a region historically characterized by snow and ice. Permafrost thaw presents significant challenges for local infrastructure, ports, communities, and defense forces. Beyond these regional issues, the thaw could release vast amounts of stored carbon into the atmosphere, along with other toxins such as mercury, methane, bacteria, and long-dormant viruses.

With the warmest summer surface air temperatures on record, widespread melting has occurred throughout the region, particularly affecting the Greenland Ice Sheet and regional sea ice. The Greenland Ice Sheet has experienced twenty-five consecutive years of ice loss, and its complete melting could have significant global ramifications, with estimates suggesting a rise in global sea levels by 6 to 7 centimeters. Such an increase could cause devastating damage to low-lying communities worldwide.

With almost all regions of the Arctic Ocean being ice-free in August, there has been an increase in ocean phytoplankton blooms in all areas except the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas and the Canadian Archipelago. Rising sea levels have contributed to coastal erosion and have inundated terrestrial permafrost, putting approximately 2.5 million square kilometers (nearly one million square miles) of subsea permafrost at risk of thawing. Furthermore, the 2023 circumpolar average peak tundra greenness reached the third highest level in the 24-year data collection period. Indeed, extreme heat, increased precipitation, and declining sea ice have characterized the Arctic in 2023.⁹

Climate change is having significant impacts on both the regional ecosystem and human activity. Sea ice coverage, in particular, has significant implications for maritime traffic. Notably, the seventeen lowest sea ice minimum extents have all occurred in the past seventeen years since 2007, sparking the interest of both commercial and military vessels. In late August 2023, non-ice-hardened ships were able to transit both the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage (see Figure 3), although draft limitations will persist for these routes regardless of ice coverage. While commercial transit shipping interest has been tempered by limited draft (which restricts the size of vessels and the amount of cargo), unpredictable weather, and high insurance costs, there is still an increase in the shipment of natural resources to market. Additionally, Chinese commercial vessels are likely gaining experience in anticipation of the future opening of the unlimited draft transpolar shipping route.

⁸ R.L. Thoman, T.A. Moon, and M. L. Druckenmiller, eds., “NOAA Arctic Report Card 2023: Executive Summary,” NOAA Technical Report OAR ARC; 23-01 (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.25923/5vfa-k694>.

⁹ Thoman, Moon, and Druckenmiller, eds., “NOAA Arctic Report Card 2023,” 4.

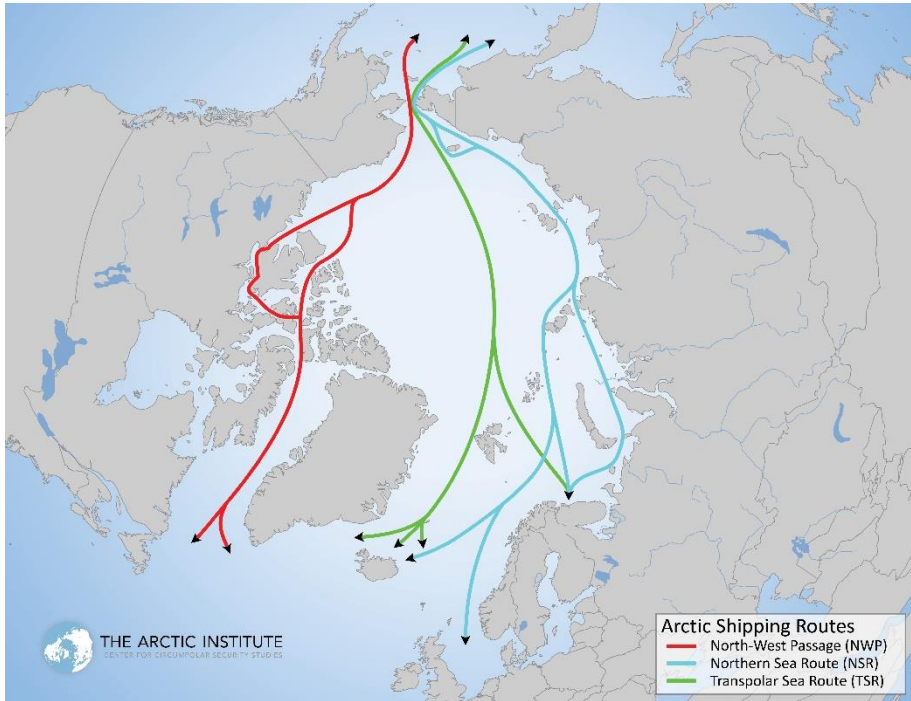


Figure 3: Arctic Shipping Routes (source: The Arctic Institute).

Though the impact of climate change is already highly visible in the Arctic, many climate and weather phenomena in the region remain poorly understood. Scientists from around the world have been collaborating to share research, develop more sophisticated models, and deepen understanding of the ongoing changes and their regional and global impacts. However, the suspension of institutional cooperation with Russian scientists has led to a significant data gap for roughly half of the Arctic landmass. This halt in scientific collaboration hampers a comprehensive understanding of the region’s climate dynamics. The effects will be felt most sharply in Russia—home to the largest share of the Arctic, with over 24,000 km of Arctic coastline and more than half of the Arctic population—but also globally, as scientists strive to predict emerging climate trends and their implications for the world economy, security, and stability.

The climate-security nexus has become a critical concern for the High North. As the Arctic opens, northern nations are reassessing their domain awareness and regional infrastructure to ensure they can continue to protect strategic interests. Non-Arctic states, including China, are looking northward with increasing interest in the potential of newly accessible maritime routes and natural re-

sources. Undoubtedly, the Arctic will become a major arena for strategic competition, driven by its abundant natural resources, expanding maritime domain, and rising levels of regional militarization.

Arctic Strategic Interests

Although the Arctic is home to only about four million inhabitants, representing a mere 0.05% of the global population,¹⁰ it holds a disproportionate influence on global security due to its strategic location, economic potential, and the wide array of stakeholders involved. Covering roughly 6% of the Earth's surface, the Arctic Ocean, despite being the smallest of the world's oceans, has drawn global attention. Simply put, what happens in the Arctic does not stay there. Climate and technological advancements are enabling greater access to the region's economic resources while profoundly impacting human and hard security. Geopolitical dynamics are also reshaping the Arctic, ensuring that it will no longer remain an isolated zone of cooperation.

The Arctic's abundant natural resources have sparked global interest. In 2008, the U.S. Geological Survey's Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal—still the most comprehensive regional assessment—estimated that the Arctic contains over one-third of the world's natural gas supply and 13 percent of its oil reserves, excluding unconventional resources such as oil shale, tar sands, and gas hydrates. These oil and gas reserves are valued in the billions; however, the survey also estimated that nearly 84 percent of these resources lie offshore, making exploration and development particularly challenging and costly. Furthermore, the Arctic faces normative challenges in oil and gas production, as fossil fuels have directly contributed to the region's accelerating warming trends.

Rare earth elements (REEs) have been discovered both onshore and offshore across the Arctic. The vast abundance of metals in Greenland has attracted significant international interest, particularly from China. As nations transition away from fossil fuels, REEs will be crucial for sustaining green energy. Additionally, the Arctic is a source of renewable energy, including wind, hydropower, solar, geothermal, and even tidal energy.

The Arctic region also holds significant fish stocks, attracting global fishing fleets that increasingly venture northward as fish migrate to warmer northern waters. The central Arctic Ocean, classified as high seas under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, covers an area of approximately 2.8 million square kilometers—about the size of the Mediterranean Sea. In 2018, ten parties signed the International Agreement to Prevent Unregulated Fishing in the High Seas of the Central Arctic Ocean. This agreement, involving major fishing nations

¹⁰ The Arctic population is approximately four million, with approximately 2.5 million located in the Russian Arctic. Roughly ten percent of the Arctic population are indigenous. Arctic Council, "Arctic Peoples," accessed February 15, 2024, <https://arctic-council.org/explore/topics/arctic-peoples/>.

including Arctic coastal states, China, Japan, South Korea, and the European Union, aims to prevent commercial fishing in the region for the next 16 years to allow for a better understanding of its ecosystems and fish stocks in order to manage them more effectively. However, as global demand for protein rises, fishing fleets may increasingly seek to harvest in northern waters, which could disrupt the already fragile ecosystem and potentially spark conflicts.

A Complex Region Unthaws

The Arctic has a long history marked by both cooperation and conflict. While the region has been inhabited for over 20,000 years and has seen centuries of strife, its harsh environment, difficult operating conditions, and vast distances have generally limited the scale of conflict. During the Cold War, the predominant concern was the threat posed by aerial attacks, given that strategic bombers or intercontinental ballistic missiles were likely to follow polar routes. While submarines have long been active beneath the Arctic ice, the sensitive nature of these operations has limited public discussion. After the Cold War, Russian military activity in the Arctic was dramatically reduced from the heightened levels seen during that period.

For decades following Gorbachev's 1987 "Zone of Peace" speech in Murmansk, the Arctic was generally regarded as a unique region of cooperation. This spirit was reinforced by the 1991 multilateral Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy and the 1996 Ottawa Declaration, marking an era of peaceful collaboration on environmental, economic, and indigenous issues. The region's unique characteristics—including its harsh climate, fragile ecosystem, indigenous communities that transcend national borders, and drive for economic development—fostered dialogue and cooperation, even in the face of emerging crises elsewhere in the world.

During the peace dividend decades, the Arctic was considered a "High North, Low Tension" region, with cooperation prevailing even after the 2014 annexation of Crimea. However, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has made it clear that the Arctic's geopolitical landscape is no longer business as usual.

Cooperative Past ... Competitive Future?

Established in 1996, the Arctic Council has become a prominent intergovernmental forum fostering cooperation in the Arctic, particularly in sustainable development, environmental protection, search and rescue, scientific collaboration, and indigenous issues. The Council comprises the eight Arctic "member" nations—Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden, and the United States—as well as thirteen "observer" states, six Permanent Participants representing indigenous groups, and additional non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations as observers. Six working groups have been established to execute the programs and projects mandated by the Arctic Council Ministers, covering a wide range of topics from climate

change to emergency response. Notably, the Council has also facilitated three legally binding agreements among the eight Arctic States, focusing on search and rescue (2011), marine oil pollution preparedness and response (2013), and scientific cooperation (2017).

Significant disruption has followed Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which occurred during Russia's term as Chair of the Arctic Council (2021-2023). In response, the other Arctic nations suspended dialogue and participation in Council activities to protest what they viewed as a violation of the Council's foundational principles. By June 2022, the Arctic-7 nations announced they had resumed some Council projects, albeit with limited Russian involvement. With the rotational chairmanship shifting to Norway in May 2023, questions about the Council's future direction have emerged. "Polarization has reached the Arctic," stated Anu Fridrikson, executive director of Arctic Frontiers, at the annual event in February 2024, a sentiment echoed by senior leaders from the Arctic-7 nations. Despite these challenges, cautious optimism remains that some level of cooperation can continue.¹¹

Indeed, even as securitization dominates discussions, there remains a recognition of the complexity of Arctic geopolitics and the region's unique status. Although high-level ties between Moscow and the Arctic-7 capitals are limited—and non-existent at the Arctic Council's ministerial level—signs suggest that some connections may persist at the working level. The Arctic Council's Permanent Participants met last fall in Tromsø, Norway, and again this February to discuss the Norwegian chairmanship and ongoing projects. Notably, two Russian indigenous representatives reportedly attended the recent meeting in person, with others participating virtually.¹² However, there appears to be little enthusiasm for resuming full relations with Russia in the Council. The Western Arctic nations remain unified in their support for Ukraine and are unlikely to reinstate full ministerial discussions with Russia, although some limited cooperation may continue at the working group level.

The lack of dialogue on Arctic affairs coincides with an increase in military activity in the region, reaching its highest levels in decades, although still well below Cold War intensities. Russia has refurbished and reopened several Soviet-era bases while prioritizing regional air defense capabilities, upgrading radar systems, and investing in electronic warfare. The Northern Fleet, based in the Kola Peninsula, comprises Russia's most capable naval assets. This fleet reportedly hosts eight ballistic missile submarines, ensuring second-strike capability, along with possibly sixteen additional submarines, including the advanced *Severodvinsk* and auxiliary submarines likely associated with the Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research.

¹¹ Mia Bennett, "While Hard Lines Are Drawn at Arctic Frontiers, Cooperation with Russia Continues Off-stage," *Cryopolitics*, February 2, 2024, <https://www.cryopolitics.com/2024/02/02/experts-concede-geopolitics-have-reached-the-arctic>.

¹² Bennett, "While Hard Lines Are Drawn at Arctic Frontiers, Cooperation with Russia Continues Off-stage."

While the Northern Fleet has close to forty surface vessels, they are of varying combat effectiveness. Yet, some are equipped with highly capable offensive weapon systems, such as the SS-N-19 *Shipwreck* and SS-N-22 *Sunburn* anti-ship missiles.¹³ Arctic ground capabilities have likely been degraded by the war in Ukraine, but essential Arctic combat assets remain, including vehicles and systems designed for cold-weather operations, as well as more traditional means of transportation like reindeer, dogsled teams, skis, and snowmobiles.¹⁴

The Arctic has also experienced a sharp increase in the frequency and scale of military exercises in recent years. NATO's Exercise Trident Juncture 2018 brought together over 50,000 personnel from all NATO allies and then-NATO partners Sweden and Finland to exercise in a defensive Article 5 scenario. Since then, subsequent NATO exercises have focused on enhancing the Alliance's capabilities in the region and improving interoperability. NATO's upcoming Exercise Nordic Response—formerly known as Cold Response, which has taken place in Northern Norway biennially—will occur in March 2024. This exercise will bring over 20,000 ground, air, and sea troops to the region to strengthen cold-weather operational capabilities and demonstrate NATO's commitment to regional deterrence and defense.¹⁵

Russia has also been active in regional military exercises, notably the *Ocean Shield* Exercise in August 2019 and the *Grom-19* in October 2019. These exercises tested Russia's strategic nuclear forces and included ten Russian submarines patrolling the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom gap, along with the reported launch of two nuclear warheads and other ballistic missiles in the Barents Sea.¹⁶ In addition to conducting weapons tests and exercising Northern Fleet capabilities, Russian warships have carried out joint patrols with Chinese vessels. A notable example occurred in August 2023, when a flotilla of eleven Russian and Chinese ships sailed near Alaska.¹⁷

No Limits Friendship?

While historically, interest in the Arctic was largely confined to Arctic states and polar explorers, warming trends and resource discoveries have now attracted global attention. China traces its Arctic involvement back to its signing of the

¹³ Colin Wall and Njord Wegge, "The Russian Arctic Threat: Consequences of the Ukraine War," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, January 25, 2023, www.csis.org/analysis/russian-arctic-threat-consequences-ukraine-war.

¹⁴ Daniel Brown, "Here's Why Russian Soldiers Are Riding around the Arctic on Sleds Pulled by Reindeer," *Business Insider*, September 3, 2017, www.businessinsider.com/russian-soldiers-riding-around-the-arctic-on-sleds-pulled-by-reindeer-2017-9.

¹⁵ "Nordic Response 2024," *Forsvaret*, February 9, 2024, <https://www.forsvaret.no/en/exercises-and-operations/exercises/nr24>.

¹⁶ Wall and Wegge, "The Russian Arctic Threat: Consequences of the Ukraine War."

¹⁷ Dzirhan Mahadzir, "Russian, Chinese Warships in East China Sea After Sailing Near Alaska," *U.S. Naval Institute (USNI) News*, August 17, 2023, <https://news.usni.org/2023/08/17/russian-chinese-warships-in-east-china-sea-after-sailing-near-alaska>.

Spitsbergen Treaty in 1925 and has heavily invested in the region over the past few decades. With research stations in strategic locations such as Svalbard, Beijing has made investments across all Arctic nations, particularly in infrastructure, natural resources, and research centers. China's 2018 Arctic White Paper outlined its approach to the region; however, questionable business practices elsewhere under its Belt and Road Initiative raise concerns about the true objectives behind its Polar Silk Road ambitions.

While Russia had long sought to keep China out of the Arctic, advocating for Arctic governance to remain within the purview of Arctic states, limited Sino-Russian cooperation in the region can be traced back to the early 2010s. Following the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia increasingly turned to China for investment and technology to develop its resource-rich Arctic zone. Joint Russian-Chinese naval patrols in 2023 further illustrate the deepening relationship between the two countries, especially in the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Despite skepticism surrounding the "no limits" friendship, there are indications of growing military, technological, and economic cooperation between the nations. Although Russia has traditionally been cautious of China's intentions in the Arctic, post-invasion sanctions have shifted its outlook, fostering a greater reliance on China as a strategic partner.

This partnership is particularly significant in the Arctic. While Chinese investment in the Russian Arctic began well before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, China has since become Russia's primary partner in Arctic development. Hydrocarbon shipments traditionally bound for Europe are increasingly redirected eastward via the Northern Sea Route. In 2023, following a successful test voyage in 2022, at least eleven ships transported Russian crude oil to China. However, the increase in maritime traffic in the region—particularly from vessels with questionable seaworthiness and lack of adherence to environmental regulations—poses tremendous ecological risks to the entire Arctic. An oil spill in this fragile region could have catastrophic effects on the Arctic states, given the relatively small size of the Arctic Ocean, interconnected currents, limited response capabilities, challenging weather conditions, and the ecosystem's fragility.

Chinese investment in critical Arctic projects is on the rise, focusing particularly on liquefied natural gas exploration, mineral extraction, and infrastructure development, including the expansion of the Indiga deep-water port and the Sosnogorsk-Indiga railway.¹⁸ However, China's previous resource exploration efforts have often lacked strict adherence to environmental and human protection standards. It is unlikely that China will change its approach in collaboration with Russia, which also maintains lower environmental and labor standards compared to the European Union and other Arctic nations.

In 2023, cooperation expanded with a memorandum of understanding signed in Murmansk between the Chinese Coast Guard and the Russian Federal Security

¹⁸ Strider, "Shifting Ice: Russia's Increasing Reliance on the Private Sector and the PRC in the Arctic," *Strider Technologies, Inc.*, February 7, 2024, https://content.striderintel.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Strider_Shifting_Ice_Report.pdf.

Service (FSB), enhancing maritime law enforcement collaboration in the region. Both Moscow and Beijing aim to disrupt the Western rules-based international order, viewing their alignment as beneficial to achieving that goal. However, it remains uncertain whether military cooperation will deepen beyond joint patrols and Coast Guard collaboration. The Kremlin will likely continue to play a junior partner role in this relationship, which may exacerbate mistrust and insecurity. Nevertheless, Moscow's limited investment options and dwindling strategic partners could provide Beijing with the opportunity to establish a sphere of influence in the Arctic that was previously unattainable.

While mutual distrust between Russia and China will likely constrain extensive military cooperation in the Arctic, China is rapidly developing the technology and capacity to operate warships in the region. Having completed thirteen Arctic research patrols with its icebreakers, the *Xue Long* and the indigenously built *Xue Long 2*, China is undoubtedly gathering extensive dual-use research on the Arctic. With the anticipated opening of the draft-unlimited trans-polar route around mid-century, China appears to be positioning itself for future maritime operations—both commercial and military—and is building operational knowledge of Arctic conditions with Russia's support.

What Will the Future Hold?

The Arctic is a unique world region with tremendous untapped potential for economic development and geopolitical conflict. The accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO will increasingly draw attention to the region as NATO's center of gravity undeniably shifts northward. NATO forces will continue to enhance their operational capabilities in a region long known for its hostile operating conditions. The extreme cold, lack of daylight, harsh weather, and vast differences between sub-regions make the Arctic a challenging environment for military operations. As former Canadian Chief of Defence Staff General Walter Natynczyk wisely remarked, "if someone were to invade the Canadian Arctic, [the] first task would be to rescue them."¹⁹

However, the invasion of Ukraine has fostered a renewed sense of unity among like-minded Western nations, prompting leaders to adapt to the emerging realities of an Arctic transformed by climate trends, economic development, and geopolitical tensions. While NATO prepares for deterrence and defense in the High North, Russia is increasingly turning eastward for the investments and technologies critical to developing its Arctic resources. Consequently, Sino-Russian cooperation will likely continue to strengthen as Putin seeks resources to sustain his war effort. Nonetheless, the prospects for a full military alliance between Beijing and Moscow remain uncertain.

¹⁹ Senate of Canada, "Proceedings of the Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence," Issue 5, Evidence, Meeting of June 7, 2010, <https://sencanada.ca/en/Content/Sen/committee/403/defe/05evb-e>.

Even Russian President Putin acknowledged this in a 2010 speech, stating, “If you stand alone you can’t survive in the Arctic.”²⁰ It remains to be seen whether he will choose to hand over the keys to his Arctic kingdom to Beijing rather than withdraw from Ukraine. Moscow’s pursuit of a partnership with China is likely to disrupt the regional balance and escalate strategic competition in the Arctic, potentially leading to the emergence of an “ice curtain” descending across the North.

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²⁰ Luke Harding, “Vladimir Putin Calls for Arctic Claims to Be Resolved under UN Law,” *The Guardian*, September 23, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/23/putin-arctic-claims-international-law>.



Unfolding Geopolitical Events Suggest a New Order in Strategic Competition – Perspectives from West Africa

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Abstract: The world is witnessing a fundamental change in the international system. The international politics will likely evolve into a competition of systems in a multipolar world. This shift has significantly influenced how African countries interact with the rest of the world. African states have entered an era of choice. The narrative of Africa being the “Dark Continent” is transforming into one of a “rising continent,” with interactions increasingly involving a growing number of “non-traditional actors.” Some African governments have increasingly embraced economic, diplomatic, and security ties with Russia. Africa’s abundance of strategic resources, favorable demographics, and attractive growth prospects give its leaders leverage in global affairs.

Africa’s relationship with the West has been complex, producing both positive and negative impacts. Neither capitalist-oriented nor socialist African governments have been able to transform the continent. A general sense of disappointment and frustration prevails among Africans toward Western powers, stemming from unfulfilled promises that democracy would lead to development and economic growth. Building trust and credibility will require greater European transparency regarding their interests, minimizing policy incoherencies, and addressing the gaps between European offerings and African needs.

Keywords: strategic competition, Africa, Europe, United States, Russia, China

Introduction

Like many other regions and countries, West Africa has entered a new “era of choice” as global actors—both emerging and established powers—show increased interest in the region amidst a changing world order characterized by “strategic competition.” However, domestic and regional challenges, conflicts, neo-colonial patterns of behavior, and global issues continue to threaten the region’s stability and future development.

The end of colonial rule had completely restructured the continent: it created new states, redefined power dynamics, reoriented economic activities, and introduced new interests. Consequently, many of these states developed a natural inclination and orientation toward their former colonial powers. However, the emergence of an increasingly interconnected and multipolar world has profoundly influenced Africa’s engagement with foreign actors, all of whom have developed a growing interest in the region. Additionally, traditional powers such as Europe, the United States, and Russia have renewed their interest in Africa, leading to significant and heightened regional engagement.

Strategic competition has become a defining characteristic of contemporary international relations, with substantial implications for regional stability and security across the globe. Despite West Africa being one of the least integrated regions in the global economy and frequently beset by internal conflicts, the ramifications and influence of strategic competition on the region cannot be overlooked. An era of choice seems to have dawned. However, West Africa faces significant challenges and conflicts at local, national, and transnational levels that threaten to destabilize the entire region. These challenges are fundamentally rooted in and perpetuated by two interrelated dimensions: inequality and insecurity.

The emerging bipolar logic, which increasingly shapes the thinking and actions of key players in the context of strategic competition at the global level, has far-reaching implications for the engagement of major powers with and towards West Africa.¹ This logic dictates their approach to the region, hindering cooperation among themselves and with regional actors despite partly overlapping interests. Although these interests are often similar and the measures and means to address major challenges are known and available, strategic competition shifts the focus and commitment toward individual national priorities, preventing effective action. As a result, both major foreign powers and key regional actors primarily focus on protecting their own interests, which makes long-term positive development unlikely. The adoption of this bipolar logic of strategic competition, therefore, appears to be opposed to the interests of West Africa.

¹ Barbara Lippert and Volker Perthes, eds., “Strategic Rivalry between United States and China: Causes, Trajectories, and Implications for Europe,” *SWP Research Paper 4* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 2020), <https://doi.org/10.18449/2020RP04>.

This article presents the authors' perspectives on the increasingly dominant characteristic of the international system: *strategic competition* and a new *era of choice*. It aims to analyze the interests and engagement of foreign actors in West Africa, offering insights into the region's development in light of emerging global dynamics. The article further examines the role of key players involved in strategic competition at the global level and their engagement in the region. Additionally, it analyzes the impact of strategic competition on regional conflicts. The article will highlight the complexity, interdependence, and interconnectedness of the threats and challenges the region faces. Finally, it will explore the implications of strategic competition on West Africa's fragile defense and security, as well as its political, economic, and social challenges, concluding with reflections on the new world order from a West African perspective.

Threats and Challenges in West Africa

The volatile West African region faces a myriad of complex threats and challenges that profoundly impact its political, economic, security, and social stability.² These interconnected and multifaceted challenges include historical conflicts rooted in the region's tumultuous past, as well as overarching trans-regional and global challenges that exacerbate existing conflicts or give rise to new ones. Collectively, these factors can be categorized into two primary dimensions: insecurity and inequality.

The nexus of inequality and insecurity in West Africa presents a profound, multidimensional challenge that undermines stability and development. These two dimensions are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, creating a complex landscape of threats that manifest at systemic levels, affecting societies and states at regional scales. The roots of these challenges are in the region's historical, social, and political contexts, with the legacy of colonization playing a critical role in shaping the dynamics of inequality and insecurity.

Social and Economic Inequality and Insecurity

Social inequality and insecurity in West Africa are often rooted in ethnic and social group affiliations, which determine access to economic resources and income opportunities, as well as basic services such as education or healthcare. The region's diverse social landscape has perpetuated disparities that foster social fragmentation and contribute to recurring inter-group tensions and conflicts, destabilizing societies.³ The distribution of wealth and resources remains extremely unequal; nevertheless, many West African governments are unwilling or

² The diversity of states, ethnicities, religions, geographical areas and the different historical, cultural and social experiences and living realities of the inhabitants make statements about West Africa as a whole extremely difficult. We therefore concentrate on a few selected challenges and threats that apply to the entire region or to most states in the region.

³ Abebe Shimeles and Tiguene Nabassaga, "Why Is Inequality High in Africa?" *Working Paper Series* No. 246 (Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire: African Development Bank Group,

unable to address this issue.⁴ As a result, marginalized populations become vulnerable to exploitation by armed groups and criminal networks, often seeking alternative means of survival in the face of economic deprivation.

Political Inequality and Insecurity

Political inequality is closely intertwined with social and economic disparities, as marginalized groups are systematically excluded from meaningful political participation. This exclusion is driven by entrenched elites who maintain power through control of state institutions and resources. Political insecurity, in turn, arises when disenfranchised groups seek to challenge the status quo, often through protests, rebellion, or insurgency. The concentration of political power in the hands of a small elite reinforces both inequality and insecurity, as the broader population has no access to political influence.⁵ This concentration of power encourages the temptation of coups and other forms of political violence as factions vie for control of the state. In many instances, the ruling elite monopolizes not only political power but also economic and social resources, exacerbating inequality and fueling instability. The persistence of political instability and coups in the region reflects the unfinished nature of nation-building processes, which remain incomplete due to the legacies of decolonization, the imposition of artificial state boundaries, and the elites' lack of interest in fundamentally addressing these issues.⁶

Corruption and Nepotism

Corruption and nepotism are pervasive challenges that hinder governance and development across West Africa. Deeply rooted in the region's political culture, these practices allow elites to allocate state resources and opportunities based on personal and social connections rather than merit or need. This undermines public trust in government institutions and exacerbates inequality, as resources intended for the public good are diverted to benefit specific social groups.⁷

Terrorism, Insurgencies, and Transnational Organized Crime

The rise of terrorism, insurgencies, and armed groups—often linked to transnational organized crime—poses a significant security threat to West Africa. These groups exploit the region's porous borders and weak state institutions, engaging in activities such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and human trafficking. The proliferation of violent extremism, particularly the spread of jihadist ideologies,

January 2017), https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/WPS_No_246_Why_is_inequality_high_in_Africa_A.pdf.

⁴ "West Africa: Extreme Inequality in Numbers," *Oxfam International*, www.oxfam.org/en/west-africa-extreme-inequality-numbers.

⁵ Olayinka Ajala, "Understanding the Crisis of Democracy in West Africa and the Sahel," *Geneva Centre for Security Policy*, In Focus, October 19, 2023, <https://www.gcsp.ch/publications/understanding-crisis-democracy-west-africa-and-sahel>.

⁶ Ajala, "Understanding the Crisis of Democracy in West Africa and the Sahel."

⁷ Ajala, "Understanding the Crisis of Democracy in West Africa and the Sahel."

has further destabilized the region, with armed groups targeting vulnerable populations and state institutions. Notable examples include the recruitment strategies employed by these groups, which target the Fulani⁸ and Tuareg ethnic groups and capitalize on existing tensions.⁹

Migration, Brain Drain, and Demographic Pressure

A lack of economic opportunities and political instability have led to significant migration from the region, particularly among young people. This brain drain further weakens local economies as skilled individuals leave in search of better prospects abroad. Meanwhile, strong demographic pressures, including rapid population growth, place additional strain on limited economic resources and services. The failure to provide adequate opportunities for youth perpetuates the cycle of poverty, unemployment, and insecurity, leaving young people increasingly disillusioned and vulnerable to radicalization or criminal activity.¹⁰

Structural Challenges and External Influences

The structural roots of these challenges are partly tied to the historical legacy of colonization, which imposed artificial state boundaries, ethnic identities, and divisions according to Western models. The unfinished nation-building process in West Africa and the lack of a cohesive national identity among large population segments continue to fuel political instability, as many states struggle to overcome the social divisions inherited from colonial rule within these artificial borders.¹¹ External influences, including global political and economic factors, further compound these structural challenges. Strategic competition among major powers has also contributed to insecurity in the region. The threats and challenges facing West Africa are multidimensional, interdependent, and mutually reinforcing. The complex interplay between inequality and insecurity, rooted in both internal and external factors, poses significant obstacles to stability and development in the region. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that accounts for the historical legacies of inequality, the ongoing political and economic dynamics, and the influence of external actors and global forces.

⁸ Africa Defense Forum, “Fulani Crisis Shows How Terror Groups Capitalize on Ethnic Tension,” *Africa Defense Forum*, September 19, 2023, <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/09/fulani-crisis-shows-how-terror-groups-capitalize-on-ethnic-tension/>.

⁹ Daniel Eizenga and Wendy Williams, “The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel,” *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, Africa Security Brief No. 38, December 2020, <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ASB-38-EN.pdf>.

¹⁰ Podcast “Can West Africa Curb Its Brain Drain?” Episode Guests: Ebenezer Obadare and Aanu Adeoye, *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 20, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/podcasts/can-west-africa-curb-its-brain-drain>.

¹¹ Frank Schubert, “Das Erbe des Kolonialismus – oder: warum es in Afrika keine Nationen gibt,” *Zeitgeschichte-online*, June 1, 2010, <https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/themen/das-erbe-des-kolonialismus-oder-warum-es-afrika-keine-nationen-gibt>.

Strategic Competition Actors and Interests in the Region

Strategic competition, characterized by the rivalry between the United States and China, encompasses various interrelated political, economic, and ideological dimensions.¹² Despite the emergence of a multipolar order, the increasingly strong logic of a bipolar world order determines the thinking and actions of key players and decision-makers in major global powers such as China and the United States.¹³ This perception also affects other actors, including Europe, Russia, India, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the resulting polarization have further intensified this competition, deepening the divide between the West and Russia, as well as China and other actors. Many of these global players are engaged in West Africa, where this complex network of interests presents both significant opportunities and inherent risks for the region's member states.

Technological and Economic Dimension

The economic interests of major foreign powers in West Africa are primarily driven by the region's rich natural resources, including oil, gas, and minerals, which are particularly important in the context of strategic competition as they are essential for producing new technologies.¹⁴ The prospect of further valuable resource discoveries increases the region's relevance and strategic importance. As a result, the focus of major powers is clearly on the extraction of resources and the development and control of key trade routes. West Africa, as a market for goods, is comparatively small and, therefore, not particularly relevant on a global scale. China, in particular, appears to integrate its approach to West Africa into the broader Belt and Road Initiative, with infrastructure projects in the region¹⁵ aimed at establishing potential trans-Saharan connections and East-West links across the Sahel to connect landlocked countries and resources to maritime trade routes leading to China.

The economic and political implications of major power conflicts for the region are interlinked, as illustrated by the impact the Russia-Ukraine war has had on the wheat supply to Africa. Ukrainian grain exports, particularly wheat, are crucial for many African countries, with over 50 % of their wheat imports coming

¹² Lippert and Perthes, eds., "Strategic Rivalry between United States and China: Causes, Trajectories, and Implications for Europe."

¹³ Lippert and Perthes, eds., "Strategic Rivalry between United States and China: Causes, Trajectories, and Implications for Europe."

¹⁴ Alexander Tripp, "The Critical-minerals Boom Is Here. Can Africa Take Advantage?" *Atlantic Council*, March 18, 2024, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/the-critical-minerals-boom-is-here-can-africa-take-advantage/; and "Developing the Critical Mineral Value Chain in West Africa," *Energy Capital & Power*, October 30, 2023, <https://energycapitalpower.com/critical-mineral-value-chain-in-west-africa/>.

¹⁵ Felix Onuah and Liz Lee, "China Pledges to Encourage Investment in Nigeria," *Reuters*, September 4, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/nigeria-china-sign-economic-nuclear-energy-pact-2024-09-03/>.

from Ukraine and Russia prior to the Russian invasion. The invasion disrupted these exports, leading to a significant grain shortage in Africa and prompting Russia to attempt to increase its influence by blocking Ukrainian grain exports while promoting its own grain as an alternative.¹⁶ Another example is the extraction of minerals and natural resources, closely linked to Russia's engagement in the Central African Republic. The involvement of the former Wagner private military company in the Central African Republic was financed mainly by granting gold and diamond mining permits. Similar agreements are either in place or currently being negotiated in the Sahel.¹⁷ Although European and U.S. companies continue to maintain a strong presence in the region, there does not appear to be an overarching and coordinated strategy, nor do they seem to have found an effective response to Russia's disruptive approach.

Ideological and Political Dimension

The ideological and political dimension of strategic competition in the region is considerably more complex. Historically, Western perspectives often portrayed Africa as the "Dark Continent," depicting it as a place of suffering, poverty, famine, and conflict.¹⁸ Recently, however, there has been a shift toward recognizing Africa's positive developments, with the continent now seen as "Rising" due to economic growth, an expanding middle class, and an increasing number of internet users.¹⁹

Major powers engage in the region not only to pursue economic interests but also to gain political support, seeking to influence public perception and align states with their agendas. West Africa's historical experience with colonialism continues to shape its interactions with foreign powers, particularly as it occupies a strategic position in global competition. Competing narratives regarding governance models—such as democracy versus authoritarianism—inform these engagements.

However, overall, the number of disinformation campaigns—according to Western definitions—targeting African nations and societies has increased tremendously in recent years. This clearly indicates the growing importance that global actors attach to the region. West Africa has certainly become a hotspot

¹⁶ Yulia Bychkovska, "Ukraine's Grain Exports Are Crucial to Africa's Food Security," *Atlantic Council*, April 5, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/econographics/ukraines-grain-exports-are-crucial-to-africas-food-security/>.

¹⁷ Alexander Tripp, "With Africa's Minerals in Demand, Russia and the US Each Offer What the Other Can't," *Atlantic Council*, May 1, 2024, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/with-africas-minerals-in-demand-russia-and-the-us-each-offer-what-the-other-cant/.

¹⁸ Robert Bates, "History of Africa through Western Eyes: From the Dark Continent to the Emerging One, Crude Generalisations Say More about the Viewer Than the Viewed," *The Guardian*, November 1, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/01/africa-history-western-eyes>.

¹⁹ Bates, "History of Africa through Western Eyes."

for (dis-)information campaigns, particularly those from Russia, which can be tied to strategic competition through the anti-Western messages and narratives they promote. According to Western analysts, these campaigns had a considerable impact on the success of military coups in the Western Sahel, directly influencing the region's political power balance.²⁰

However, despite the rise of disinformation targeting African populations with anti-Western narratives, surveys such as *Afrobarometer* (2021) reveal that many Africans still view Western democratic models as developmental role models, with Chinese models following closely behind. In contrast, Russia is perceived as having minimal influence.²¹

A similar picture emerges in West Africa. Here, too, most respondents prefer the Western model of government and society over the Chinese one. However, there is a notable rejection of the West in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger – the three states where Russia has managed to expand its influence in recent years and on which it concentrates. It is difficult to determine whether these trends were already visible consequences of Russian and Chinese influence or whether surveys such as these were fundamental to their strategy of exerting influence. It seems that Russia plays an almost negligible role in terms of role models, despite the display of Russian flags and symbols during anti-Western protests supporting the coups in the Western Sahel. Unlike China, Russia cannot present a competing political model. Instead, it focuses on positioning itself, like China, as a protective power against Western neo-colonialism – a narrative China also heavily promotes.²²

On the other hand, the perception of the old, predominantly European colonial powers as role models appears to be negative.²³ This perception is influenced by the legacy of European colonialism in the collective memory of West African societies, which contributes to low approval ratings for former colonial powers as role models. While there is sympathy for Western social and political models among African populations, China's recent emergence as a significant player is noteworthy. In contrast, Russia lacks a competing political model and cannot be considered a systemic rival to Western powers.

Therefore, strategic competition in this region will likely become even more severe and intense on an ideological level. As the cognitive domain is increasingly

²⁰ "Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, March 13, 2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/>.

²¹ Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Edem Selormey, "Africans Welcome China's Influence but Maintain Democratic Aspirations," *Afrobarometer Dispatch* No. 489, November 15, 2021, https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ad489-pap3-africans_welcome_chinas_influence_maintain_democratic_aspirations-afrobarometer_dispatch-15nov21.pdf.

²² Sanny and Selormey, "Africans Welcome China's Influence but Maintain Democratic Aspirations."

²³ Sanny and Selormey, "Africans Welcome China's Influence but Maintain Democratic Aspirations."

recognized as a key area in future conflicts between major powers, West Africa will also be increasingly affected by the intensifying competition for people's attitudes.²⁴ The growing willingness of major players to grant African states more influence in international organizations, e.g., a seat at the UN Security Council (UNSC), clearly shows the extent to which they are contending for the favor of African actors. At the same time, the continued denial of veto rights reveals their reluctance to resolve the asymmetry in these relationships or to grant countries in the Global South an equal standing.²⁵

The United States of America's Interest in West Africa

The U.S. interest in strategic competition lies in maintaining the status quo by preserving the liberal rules-based order, with international organizations dominated by the West. U.S. engagement in the region is primarily focused on countering Islamic extremism and violent terrorism by fighting and containing globally operating Islamist groups like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. However, the United States increasingly views Africa, particularly West Africa, as a battleground in its broader effort to contain the rising influence of China.²⁶

While the United States focuses its strategic attention on the Middle East, Russia, and China, West Africa appears to be perceived as a peripheral area of secondary importance. The United States has not been particularly engaged in international efforts and interventions since 2014, led primarily by France, most notably through Operation Barkhane and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which have not yielded the desired outcomes. Rather than stabilizing the region, these interventions have often aggravated existing tensions and contributed to deteriorating security conditions. Moreover, the U.S. failures in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Mali have further eroded trust in Western models of intervention and governance, leading to skepticism regarding the West's ability and commitment to addressing regional challenges.

The Interest of Europe in West Africa

Europe is also interested in maintaining the status quo at the global level with its international organizations and the liberal rules-based world order, as the post-war order grants Europe a relatively significant influence in these organizations,

²⁴ Tzu-Chieh Hung and Tzu-Wei Hung, "How China's Cognitive Warfare Works: A Front-line Perspective of Taiwan's Anti-Disinformation Wars," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 7, no. 4 (December 2020): 1-18, 2-3, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogac016>.

²⁵ Michelle Nichols, "US Supports Two Permanent UN Security Council Seats for Africa," *Reuters*, September 13, 2024, www.reuters.com/world/us-supports-two-permanent-un-security-council-seats-africa-2024-09-12/.

²⁶ Gabriel Delsol and Claire M. Metelits, "A New Type of Threat: Russia, China and Digital Authoritarianism in West Africa," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, December 26, 2020, <https://gija.georgetown.edu/2020/12/26/a-new-type-of-threat-russia-china-and-digital-authoritarianism-in-west-africa/>.

which no longer fully reflects its current global relevance. While maintaining a strong alliance with the United States through NATO and shared political interests, Europe and the European Union aim to avoid becoming overly entangled in a bipolar framework of strategic competition. This caution is largely driven by Europe's substantial economic ties to China, making it reluctant to adopt a confrontational stance that could jeopardize its position as a dominant global economic and trade power. A multipolar world, characterized by the integration of diverse voices and perspectives, would provide Europe with greater flexibility in navigating the complexities of international relations.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 highlighted the critical importance for European states to diversify trade and secure access to essential resources. In this context, West Africa emerges as a potential alternative source of natural resources, offering Europe an opportunity to reduce its dependence on China and Russia while broadening its resource and trade base.

The historical ties between European nations and West African states are often overshadowed by the colonial legacy and contemporary challenges such as migration, security threats from extremist groups, and economic disparities. Europe has traditionally followed French leadership in West Africa, particularly in the Western Sahel. It has been unable to develop a common policy, resulting in a fragmented and disordered EU approach, lacking a cohesive strategy for the region.²⁷

Despite being affected by irregular migration, as well as challenges such as human and drug trafficking, Europe's focus has shifted towards the East due to the war in Ukraine and the growing threat of a more aggressive Russia. At the same time, European powers had to withdraw from the Sahel following a series of coups. Although the new regimes' rhetoric was primarily directed against France, other European actors were unable to distance themselves from French dominance to set their own priorities and maintain a European presence, ultimately withdrawing their military forces from the region.

Simultaneously, Europe continues to promote civil society, humanitarian initiatives, and democratic governance as key components of their engagement. Consequentially, Russia openly contests Western influence through assertive actions, while China employs a more subtle approach characterized by gradual economic and political expansion.²⁸

Russia's Interest in West Africa

Russia appears to be a classic realist actor whose basic premise is the zero-sum game and thus acts to maximize its power at the expense of the power of other

²⁷ Benedikt Erforth and Denis M. Tull, "The Failure of French Sahel Policy: An Opportunity for European Cooperation?" *Megatrends Spotlight* 13, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, September 5, 2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/mta-spotlight-13-the-failure-of-french-sahel-policy>.

²⁸ Alexandra Heldt, "Westafrika und die EU-Wahlen," Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, June 19, 2024, <https://www.freiheit.org/de/westafrika/westafrika-und-die-eu-wahlen>.

actors, at least up to a certain threshold. Russia's engagement in West Africa, particularly in the Western Sahel region, reflects its ambition to redefine the global international order. This engagement is characterized by a strategic alignment with authoritarian regimes that prioritize the consolidation of power over democratic governance and human rights. While Russia seeks to position itself as a counterbalance to Western influence, its support for local governments serves the interests of those in power rather than fostering genuine political alternatives for the populace. Additionally, Russia has tested grey zone tactics in West Africa before applying them elsewhere.²⁹

Through its actions, Russia often undermines the credibility and effectiveness of Western actors and institutions, including those dominated by Western powers or the United Nations. By cultivating alliances with regimes in West Africa, Russia challenges the established norms of international engagement and diminishes the influence of Western-dominated multilateral organizations and Western powers. As described above, the Russian approach is twofold, with a clear focus on security assistance in exchange for natural resources and as a political-ideological approach to openly challenge Western global dominance. In the long term, these dynamics pose significant risks not only to regional stability and security but also to the well-being of the general population. The prioritization of regime security over public welfare may increase insecurity, while the regimes' overall reliance on Russia may not pay off in the mid to long term.³⁰

China's Interest in West Africa

China's increasing economic and political power, along with its further integration into the global economic cycle, has created opportunities to expand its influence globally through projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the spread of Anti-Western narratives, and its still relatively small but growing military engagement. These efforts aim to challenge Western dominance and offer alternatives.³¹ China has deployed military forces in West Africa as part of the MINUSMA operation. Its plans to build a naval base in Guinea, the second on the

²⁹ Delsol and Metelits, "A New Type of Threat: Russia, China and Digital Authoritarianism in West Africa."

³⁰ Saskya Vandoorne, Nick Paton Walsh, and Gianluca Mezzofiore, "Massacre in Burkina Faso Left 600 Dead, Double Previous Estimates, According to French Security Assessment," *CNN*, October 4, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/10/04/africa/burkina-faso-massacre-600-dead-french-intel-intl/index.html>.

³¹ Amar Bhattacharya et al., "China's Belt and Road: The New Geopolitics of Global Infrastructure Development," Interview by Bruce Jones, edited by Ryan Hass, Bruce Jones, and Jennifer Mason, *Foreign Policy at Brookings*, April 2019, www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/FP_20190419_bri_interview.pdf.

African continent, clearly demonstrate its growing interest in the region, particularly in the Atlantic zone, and its heightened readiness to protect global investments militarily.³²

On the economic front, China focuses on exploiting West Africa's natural resources and connecting resource-rich areas to the coastal states and their ports through infrastructure projects. China also leverages its advanced technology sector and the BRI to promote digital authoritarianism by selling sophisticated technologies, such as smart city platforms and facial recognition systems. While China's strategy aims to enhance its international image and export governance values aligned with digital authoritarianism, it is also profit-driven due to private sector involvement.³³

In this way, China positions itself as a strategic competitor to the West, especially in West Africa, by presenting alternatives to Western models, spreading positive narratives, portraying its own model as successful and worthy of emulation, and seeking support and access. China's strategy aims to reshape perceptions of the People's Republic of China among West African decision-makers while negatively framing Western models.

Consequently, rather than positioning itself as a systemic rival or competitor to the West in West Africa, China primarily emerges as an economic competitor on the surface. However, through its long-term strategy of subtle and indirect influence, China seeks to establish incremental advantages within the region as part of its overall strategic approach on a global scale.³⁴

This analysis clearly illustrates the various forms of involvement and interests of foreign players in the region. It also highlights how the perception and mindset of global strategic competition dominate these actors' overall engagement in West Africa. These patterns of perception and thinking largely hinder cooperation with regional counterparts and exacerbate regional conflicts or prevent adequate support in addressing them.

Western approaches to aid and development in West Africa are often perceived as paternalistic and neo-colonial, largely due to the region's historical ties to colonialism. Western assistance is typically accompanied by conditions related to good governance, the promotion of democracy, and respect for human rights, which can create a sense of external imposition. In contrast, China and Russia are seen as less prescriptive in their involvement, as they do not impose such conditions. However, their engagement also carries significant long-term risks, exemplified by China's controversial involvement in Sri Lanka and Russia's active reshaping of the region's political, social, and economic structures. Despite these

³² Sankalp Gurjar, "The Changing Contours of Great Power Politics in West Africa," Indian Council of World Affairs, April 10, 2023, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=9250&lid=6003.

³³ Delsol and Metelits, "A New Type of Threat: Russia, China and Digital Authoritarianism in West Africa."

³⁴ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

complexities, surveys indicate that the Western development model remains the preferred option among West African populations. Nonetheless, regional elites often act as proxies for the interests of external powers – a strategy employed not only by China and Russia but also by Western actors, who, despite their rhetoric, have historically collaborated with favorable dictators in the region. This dynamic reflects an emerging pattern of strategic competition, with local elites instrumentalized by global powers to counter their rivals' influence.

Conclusion and Future Perspectives

The contemporary international system is confronted with significant challenges, including intensifying strategic competition, climate change, rapid technological advancements, large-scale migration, global epidemics, inter-state conflicts, and terrorism. These dynamics contribute to an increasingly volatile and uncertain world order with significant ramifications for West Africa, as evidenced by heightened Chinese engagement, Russia's presence, military coups, the withdrawal of Western forces from the Sahel, and the exit of the Alliance of Sahel States from ECOWAS. Strategic competition in West Africa has political, economic, and ideological dimensions that shape interactions among states and non-state actors. The ongoing geopolitical tensions, exacerbated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have further complicated these dynamics. (Dis)information campaigns, particularly from Russia, aimed at promoting anti-Western narratives, have influenced political developments in the region, including military coups and the retreat of Western/European forces that have dominated the region for over a century. Ultimately, while Russia positions itself as a counter to Western influence without offering a viable alternative political model, China's increased influence may change West Africa's strategic landscape in the long term. This multifaceted competition among global powers poses significant risks to regional stability and development, as each actor prioritizes its strategic interests over providing genuine political alternatives for local populations.

While recent proposals to include Africa in the G20 and the UN Security Council represent initial steps toward establishing equitable partnerships, they may be insufficient to address the structural imbalances that undermine the Western-dominated international order. Enhanced African representation in institutions like the UNSC is not only a moral imperative but also essential for revitalizing a multilateral system that depends on legitimacy through fair representation.

West Africa possesses the potential to significantly influence the future of the African continent, either as a peace broker or a conflict instigator. If viewed solely as a site of competition and resource exploitation, it could exacerbate global security issues and lead to increased migration towards Europe and the Americas. To foster mutually beneficial partnerships that enhance quality of life and position Africa as a regional actor in global affairs, external partners must demonstrate genuine interest in addressing West Africa's challenges, reconsider political interference, and support local solutions. At the same time, African nations should unify their interests to present a cohesive voice on the global stage.

However, West Africa's fragmentation and relatively low economic performance hinder its ability to assert influence amid strategic competition. The region remains heavily reliant on external assistance for security, economic development, and climate change mitigation, with internal divisions complicating coordinated efforts. Europe, not having a common position, offers an opportunity for more equitable negotiations. Yet, West Africa's asymmetric relationship with Europe limits its prospects for rapid economic growth without deeper regional integration and technology transfers.

The complex relationship between Africa and the West has yielded benefits and exploitation, highlighting the necessity of understanding Africa within its own context rather than through external frameworks. Disillusionment among Africans towards Western powers stems from perceived failures in delivering on promises of democracy as a catalyst for development. Establishing trust will require greater transparency from European powers regarding their interests while reducing policy inconsistencies.

As these new policies may unfold, caution is necessary to avoid neocolonial pitfalls by refraining from exploitative practices undermining the local agency. A balance between tradition and modernity is essential; aligning traditional structures with modern advancements ensures culturally sensitive development that respects heritage while embracing innovation. Such a strategy—encompassing technological innovation, education, regional collaboration, local empowerment, and cultural sensitivity—can create a robust foundation for sustainable progress in West Africa. As global powers engage with this resource-rich region, prioritizing local agency and sustainable development will be crucial for fostering trust among West African nations. These concepts have been well-known and recognized for decades; nevertheless, both international and regional actors have often been unable or unwilling to implement them effectively.

Brain drain and the migration crisis from West Africa receive little attention from global powers, with Europe being a notable exception. However, Europe's engagement with the issue is largely driven by concerns over security and the rise of right-wing anti-immigration movements rather than a genuine commitment to addressing the root causes of migration. Consequently, Europe's response remains limited in scope and lacks a comprehensive strategy to support the region's development and create sustainable alternatives to migration. Nevertheless, in their efforts to resist and escape the emerging bipolar logic, both Europe and West Africa appear to be natural allies that could join forces on the global stage for mutual benefit.

In the broader geopolitical context, major powers are engaged in a competitive struggle for influence in West Africa, often prioritizing access to resources and political leverage over good governance or democratic principles. This is particularly evident in the strategic competition between Russia and France in the Sahel, China's influence through its Belt and Road Initiative, and the United States' attempts to counterbalance Chinese expansion in the region. These geopolitical rivalries frequently overshadow efforts to improve political stability or

governance structures, as weak and corrupt governments often enable external actors to advance their own agendas.

The logic of strategic competition has created a scenario where major powers prioritize expanding their spheres of influence over collaborating to address regional challenges. This is further compounded by disinformation campaigns targeting both elites and local populations to sway them toward the interests of one or another power. While there is some common ground in the fight against Islamic terrorism, cooperation remains limited due to shifting geopolitical dynamics and competing strategic interests, further hampering the development of a coordinated international response to terrorism in the region.

This pattern of competition among major powers prevents a unified approach to addressing the underlying challenges facing West Africa. Instead, the region is pressured to choose sides within a global framework of strategic rivalry, particularly in light of tensions between the West, Russia, and China. These external pressures, combined with internal governance challenges, prevent West African states from achieving deeper regional cooperation and integration, which could otherwise strengthen their collective influence on the international stage. The lack of regional unity further weakens their position, leaving them vulnerable to external manipulation and unable to negotiate effectively with major powers.

Recent developments suggest that rather than progressing toward greater regional integration, West Africa is experiencing fragmentation. The “era of choice,” in which many West African actors see themselves as navigating a geopolitical landscape of competing influences, offers potential leverage. However, this potential can only be realized if regional actors manage to consolidate enough political and economic weight to negotiate on more equal terms with global powers. Unfortunately, given current trends, this seems unlikely in the near future. As a result, West African nations will likely continue facing difficulties in asserting their agency and advancing their interests in a global arena dominated by major powers prioritizing their strategic goals over the region’s long-term stability and development.

Disclaimer

The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not represent official views of the PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, participating organizations, or the Consortium’s editors.

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Hybrid Threats and Strategic Competition

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Abstract: Strategic competition is not new, nor is the use of activities short of warfare by governments to shape the international system in their favor. However, the ability of state and non-state actors to directly influence populations through a range of rapid and non-attributable actions is different from previous iterations of strategic competition. These activities, referred to in this article as hybrid threats, directly challenge state sovereignty and represent the key distinguishing feature of contemporary strategic competition. To clarify this argument, the article aims to provide working definitions of strategic competition and its distinction from great power competition; to explain what hybrid threats and hybrid warfare are and their roles in the broader strategic objectives of state and non-state actors; to describe how strategic competitors and adversaries perceive these activities; and to emphasize the importance of building resilience within populations to counter hybrid threats.

Keywords: hybrid threats, hybrid warfare, irregular warfare, strategic competition, great power competition, unrestricted warfare, political warfare, grey zone activities.

Introduction

Strategic competition is not new, nor is the use of activities short of warfare by governments to shape the international system in their favor. In the nineteenth century, for example, the British and Russian empires employed a range of economic, political, diplomatic, and espionage activities in Central Asia to compete for influence and control in what became known as “the Great Game.” During the Cold War, the United States and its allies similarly competed with the Soviet Union through a complex mix of foreign policy measures short of full-scale war to shape the international system in their favor and avoid escalation to

conventional and nuclear war. These activities are, in fact, the very foundation of international relations.

The return to “great power competition” following Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and China’s challenges to sea lines of communication in the South China Sea has renewed focus on activities short of open warfare to shape the international system. While this phase of strategic competition shares some similarities with its historical antecedents, several factors make it unique, including new technologies and the rise of non-state actors with global reach and influence. Perhaps most critically, the ability of actors to directly influence another state’s population through a range of actions—affecting that state’s capacity to project power both domestically and internationally—distinguishes this phase of strategic competition from earlier ones. These activities, referred to in this article as “hybrid threats” (HT), directly challenge state sovereignty and are the defining feature of contemporary strategic competition.

Western states face several challenges in countering the use of HT by adversaries seeking to influence their populations. The most significant of these challenges is a lack of consensus on terminology, which hampers a unified effort to counter HT activities in this new phase of strategic competition. To address this issue, this article aims to provide clear definitions for the terms used to describe the actors, their objectives, and the tactics they employ to influence and shape the current international system. Specifically, it distinguishes between great power competition and strategic competition, defines and categorizes the types of HT used in strategic competition and their objectives, differentiates HT from hybrid warfare (HW), and concludes by proposing that effective countermeasures should focus on states building resilience within their populations.

Great Power Competition vs. Strategic Competition

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges to understanding hybrid threats as part of strategic competition is the lack of consensus on what constitutes strategic competition and how it differs, if at all, from great power competition. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, they are not synonymous. The United States began using the term “great power competition” to shift its security priorities from the “Global War on Terror” to addressing threats posed by “near-peer competitor states” following Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.¹ The 2015 National Defense Strategy, under the Obama administration, highlighted great power competition as a key concern, a focus that continued in

¹ Jim Garamone, “Dempsey: U.S. Forces Must Adapt to Deal with Near-Peer Competitors,” *Joint Chiefs of Staff*, August 17, 2015, accessed January 22, 2024, www.jcs.mil/Media/News/News-Display/Article/613868/dempsey-us-forces-must-adapt-to-deal-with-near-peer-competitors/.

national security documents under both the Trump and Biden administrations.² These documents, and others, emphasize threats posed by Russia and China.

Great power competition involves near-peer adversaries using a range of statecraft instruments to challenge the international status quo. Critical to great power competition is a state's capacity and capability to create and project power through its military, nuclear arsenal, economic strength, diplomatic influence, and ability to attract and sway other actors in the international system. Additionally, it requires the wisdom to effectively combine these elements for strategic success. These capabilities align with what Joseph Nye famously categorized as hard, soft, and smart power, respectively.³

Strategic competition differs from great power competition in several key respects. Most notably, strategic competition involves more than just "near-peer competitors" like China and Russia. In the current international system, a variety of state and non-state actors are challenging the global political, economic, and military status quo—commonly referred to as the "rules-based order"—with the aim of reshaping the system to their advantage. The creation of BRICS in 2010 (comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and its expansion to five additional countries in 2024 (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, UAE, and Saudi Arabia) represents a significant challenge to the Western-led global economic and financial institutions established after World War II.⁴ The emergence of new security partnerships, particularly through arms sales, also poses a challenge to the current international order. For instance, Türkiye, a NATO ally, maintains ties with several countries that challenge Western-based rules and norms, including Russia. In 2023, Türkiye became one of the leading producers of weapons systems, such as the AKINCI unmanned aerial vehicle, which it now exports to various countries, including Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.⁵

States with regional ambitions also exert influence in ways that reshape the strategic landscape. Qatar, for instance, has taken on an increased diplomatic role throughout the Middle East, acting as an intermediary for U.S. negotiations with the Taliban in Afghanistan and attempting to broker a truce between Hamas

² Ronald O'Rourke, "Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense – Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Services*, October 3, 2023, Report, R43838, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R43838.pdf>; See also: Michael J. Mazarr, Bryan Frederick, and Yvonne K. Crane, *Understanding a New Era of Strategic Competition* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, November 2022), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA290-4.html.

³ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs Books, 2005).

⁴ Alyssa Ayres, "How the BRICS Got Here," *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 31, 2017, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/how-brics-got-here>.

⁵ Ali Bakir, "Turkey's Defense Industry Is on the Rise: The GCC Is One of Its Top Buyers," *Atlantic Council*, August 4, 2023, accessed January 16, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/turkey-defense-baykar-gcc-gulf/>.

and Israel following the October 7, 2023, attacks.⁶ India's central role in shaping BRICS, along with its continued rise as a major consumer market and growing exporter, positions it as a major contender in regional dynamics and the global economy.⁷ Similarly, as previously mentioned, Türkiye is expanding its regional and even global influence through its arms exports.

Amid these challenges to the current international status quo, non-state actors continue to play a role in strategic competition, both as independent agents and as "proxies" for states seeking to challenge the global order. Hamas, for example, has prompted a shift in U.S. military posture and aid priorities following the October 7, 2023, attacks on Israel. The extent to which Hamas operates as an independent non-state actor or in collaboration with Iran and other states remains a topic of debate.⁸ Equally important, despite the defeat of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, ISIS continues to shape security priorities in various regions, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where both ISIS and Al-Qaeda threaten stability, prompting involvement from Western powers as well as Russia and China.⁹

In sum, strategic competition involves an array of state and non-state actors seeking to challenge Western-established economic, security, legal, and political norms and institutions.¹⁰ While Russia and China may be the primary threats, they are not the only actors capable of challenging the global system.

Hybrid Threats, Hybrid Warfare, and Strategic Competition

This era of strategic competition encompasses both the capabilities and intentions of state and non-state actors to shape regional dynamics and the international system in their favor. What distinguishes strategic competition today, however, is the ability of these actors to directly target a country's population, aiming to hinder governments from projecting power both

⁶ Stephen Kalin, "Gaza Diplomacy Cements Qatar's Global Mediator Role," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 25, 2023, accessed January 27, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/gaza-diplomacy-cements-qatars-global-mediator-role-29e0ffb7>.

⁷ Bhaskar Chakravorti and Gaurav Dalmia, "Is India the World's Next Great Economic Power?" *Harvard Business Review*, September 6, 2023, accessed February 2, 2024, <https://hbr.org/2023/09/is-india-the-worlds-next-great-economic-power>.

⁸ Fatima Al-Kassab, "What Is the 'Axis of Resistance' of Iran-Backed Groups in the Middle East?" *NPR*, October 26, 2023, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/26/1208456496/iran-hamas-axis-of-resistance-hezbollah-israel>.

⁹ Jason Warner et al., *The Islamic State in Africa: The Emergence, Evolution, and Future of the Next Jihadist Battlefield* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197639320.001.0001>.

¹⁰ Here institutions refer to Douglas North's definition: "Institutions are the humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic, and social interaction. They consist of both informal constraints (sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct), and formal rules (constitutions, laws, property rights)...[to] reduce uncertainty in exchange." Douglas C. North, "Institutions," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 97-112, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.5.1.97>.

domestically and internationally. These activities—often difficult to detect and even harder to attribute to a specific actor—are known as hybrid threats. In fact, hybrid threats may be the principal means of strategic competition today.

Countering hybrid threats is complicated by a lack of consensus on terminology and the broader objectives of these activities within strategic competition. In Europe, one of the most frequently cited definitions of HT comes from the Hybrid Center of Excellence (Hybrid CoE), established in 2017 as a collaborative initiative between NATO, the European Union, and partner nations. The center was created in response to Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine. The Hybrid CoE defines HT as a “concept” that,

... refers to an action conducted by state or non-state actors, whose goal is to undermine or harm a target by influencing its decision-making at the local, regional, state or institutional level. Such actions are coordinated and synchronized and deliberately target democratic states’ and institutions’ vulnerabilities. Activities can take place, for example, in the political, economic, military, civil or information domains. They are conducted using a wide range of means and designed to remain below the threshold of detection and attribution.¹¹

This definition highlights several key points for understanding hybrid threats in the context of strategic competition. First, the Hybrid CoE’s “concept” identifies both state and non-state actors as perpetrators of HT, indicating that it is not exclusively a state-driven activity. For instance, at their peak, ISIS and Al-Qaeda employed a range of HT tactics to undermine political legitimacy and challenge state security in regions like the Middle East, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the West. The September 11th attacks, as terrorism scholar Bruce Hoffman notes, compelled the United States and its allies to completely redirect their foreign policy, altering the course of history.¹²

Critically, ISIS and Al-Qaeda maintained a robust information warfare capability designed to propagate their grand strategic narratives of providing an alternative worldview and political system to Western, secular liberalism.¹³ Before the demise of the Islamic State in 2017, ISIS also possessed the capability to attract an estimated 40,000 “foreign fighters” and supporters to its so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq.¹⁴ These groups still have the ability to carry out acts

¹¹ Hybrid CoE, “Hybrid Threat as a Concept,” accessed January 22, 2024, www.hybridcoe.fi/hybrid-threats-as-a-phenomenon/.

¹² Bruce Hoffman, “Rethinking Terrorism and Counterterrorism Since 9/11,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 25, no. 5 (2002): 303-316, <https://doi.org/10.1080/105761002901223>.

¹³ Samantha Mahood and Halim Rane, “Islamist Narratives in ISIS Recruitment Propaganda,” *The Journal of International Communication* 23, no. 1 (2017): 15-35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13216597.2016.1263231>.

¹⁴ Richard Barrett, “Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees” (New York, NY: The Soufan Center, October 2017), <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp->

of terrorism globally, utilizing this crude and unlawful form of force to exert influence and shape state behavior. One could argue, therefore, that ISIS and Al-Qaeda were engaging in a form of strategic competition with the West. The 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy, in fact, listed “violent extremist organizations” alongside four countries—China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—as significant threats to the U.S. homeland.¹⁵

Despite the pivot away from the Global War on Terror, non-state actors continue to play a significant role in strategic competition, both as independent actors and as so-called “proxy forces” receiving varying levels of support or funding from states. As described earlier, Hamas’s actions have compelled the United States and other Western powers to recalibrate their security priorities following the October 7, 2023, attack in Israel. Non-state actors, therefore, can participate in strategic competition by disrupting the international order and influencing countries’ foreign policy priorities.

Second, the Hybrid CoE’s definition is valuable for its emphasis on the effects of hybrid threats. Their concept highlights that HT aim to “deliberately target democratic states’ and institutions’ vulnerabilities.” In other words, HT seek to exploit various vulnerabilities within a state with the overall goal of undermining a country’s democratic system. These vulnerabilities may include ethnic and/or religious fissures within the population, migration issues, economic disparities, and disagreements over a country’s values and norms, to name a few. Ultimately, state and non-state actors “weaponize” these vulnerabilities to further divide and weaken nations.

In the United States, for instance, scholars and law enforcement have identified Russian efforts to exploit racial tensions prior to the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, including the amplification of social media posts on all sides of the racial debate.¹⁶ Importantly, Niklas Nilssen and colleagues note that state and non-state actors can also target non-democracies, broadening the definition of HT’s goals to encompass any political system. They argue that actors utilize HT to “achieve outcomes without a war, to disrupt, undermine or damage the target’s political system and cohesion...”¹⁷ This broader perspective helps expand the discussion on how HT operates in strategic competition, as it includes

content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf.

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge,” <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

¹⁶ Jason Parham, “Targeting Black Americans, Russia’s IRA Exploited Racial Wounds,” *Wired*, December 17, 2018, accessed January 19, 2024, www.wired.com/story/russia-ira-target-black-americans/.

¹⁷ Niklas Nilsson et al., “Security Challenges in the Grey Zone: Hybrid Threats and Hybrid Warfare,” in *Hybrid Warfare: Security and Asymmetric Conflicts in International Relations*, ed. Mikael Weissmann et al. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021), 2, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781788317795.0005>.

both state and non-state actors engaging in HT activities to destabilize non-democracies as well as democracies.

However, the Hybrid CoE's definition falls short of capturing the broader goal of actors using hybrid threats as part of strategic competition: weakening the current global system and reshaping it to their advantage. As will be elaborated, actors employing HT often aim to exploit existing vulnerabilities within a country to weaken and divide it, thereby hindering its ability to project power regionally and globally. In this context, the objective of HT is not merely to undermine democratic institutions (or any political system) but to erode these institutions in a way that diminishes a country's capacity to project power, thus creating a window of opportunity for the acting state to operate unobstructed and ultimately alter the regional or international system in its favor.

Third, the Hybrid COE's definition highlights that HT include "a wide range of means ... designed to remain below the threshold of detection and attribution." Typically, definitions of HT focus on a limited set of activities, including disinformation, mal-information, and cyber operations such as Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks or ransomware.¹⁸ However, the Hybrid COE's definition is valuable because it allows for the possibility that HT could include virtually anything. Mark Galeotti explores in depth the notion that nearly anything can be weaponized—information, resources, criminal networks, and even imagination—to target populations and weaken states' abilities to project power, particularly in an era of heightened interdependence.¹⁹

Similarly, Mikael Weissmann identifies categories of hybrid threats rather than discrete events. His seven categories include diplomatic,²⁰ economic, technological, information, "unconventional methods" (a catch-all category encompassing activities like terrorism and organized crime), civil (activities targeting civil society), and non-kinetic attacks against the military, including activities like information warfare designed to undermine the morale of opposing

¹⁸ Disinformation is incorrect information deliberately spread to cause harm. Mal-information is true information deliberately spread to cause harm, and misinformation is false information spread without the intention to cause harm. Information as HT involves intention and, therefore, disinformation and mal-information are the better terms. See: Claire Wardle, "Understanding Information Disorder," *First Draft News*, September 22, 2020, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/>.

¹⁹ Mark Galeotti, *The Weaponization of Everything: A Field Guide to the New Way of War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

²⁰ Although Weissmann does not specify this, "public diplomacy" is the act of heads of state speaking directly to populations with the aim of influencing them, conforming to this article's definition of HT as directly targeting populations. See: Mikael Weissmann, "Conceptualizing and Countering Hybrid Threats and Hybrid Warfare: The Role of the Military in the Grey Zone," in *Hybrid Warfare: Security and Asymmetric Conflicts in International Relations*, 65-66, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781788317795.0011>.

troops.²¹ This list of categories is valuable because it provides a range of specific activities to observe and future activities to consider. For instance, significant attention has been paid to how state and non-state actors utilize cyber activities, often masking attribution and detection, for strategic goals.²² These activities could be classified within Weissmann’s “technological” category. However, in addition to cyber activities, the technological category could also encompass the rapidly expanding use of AI as a hybrid threat or the potential exploitation of big data for strategic purposes. Therefore, Weissmann’s categories facilitate the organization and cataloging of current activities while also considering future possibilities.

Additionally, two more categories could enhance Weissmann’s HT list. The first focuses on “resources” as a hybrid threat, including energy, food, and water, highlighting how state and non-state actors exploit these vulnerabilities for strategic purposes. Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Europe’s reliance on Russian oil and natural gas became a major concern, prompting several European countries to reduce their dependence on Russian energy.²³ Russian and Ukrainian grain exports also emerged as critical vulnerabilities, subject to weaponization.²⁴ The second category involves the use of culture, values, and history as hybrid threats. In a September 2022 speech, Vladimir Putin claimed that “the dictatorship of the Western elites is directed against all societies, including the peoples of the Western countries themselves. This is a challenge to all. This is a complete denial of humanity, the overthrow of faith and traditional values.” He has also framed his operations in Ukraine and beyond as a defense of Russians’ historic rights.²⁵ Thus, culture, values, and history represent another significant type of HT.

Finally, Hybrid CoE’s emphasis on the challenges of detecting HT and, when detected, attributing them accurately is critical for understanding these activities within the context of strategic competition. Mikael Weissmann’s insightful edited volume on hybrid warfare notes that “deception and denial are inherent in hybrid methods, and it is sometimes difficult to know for sure that warfare is

²¹ Weissmann, “Conceptualizing and Countering Hybrid Threats and Hybrid Warfare,” 65-66.

²² Christian Payne and Lorraine Finlay, “Addressing Obstacles to Cyber-Attribution: A Model Based on State Response to Cyber-Attack,” *The George Washington International Law Review* 49, no. 3 (2017): 535-568, https://149801758.v2.pressablecdn.com/wp-content/uploads/_pda/ILR-Vol-49.3_Panye-Finlay.pdf.

²³ Mark Finley and Anna B. Mikulska, “Wielding the Energy Weapon: Differences Between Oil and Natural Gas” (Houston: Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, June 26, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.25613/G9P2-3F78>.

²⁴ Josep Borrell, “Russia Must Stop Using Food as a Weapon,” *European Union External Action*, August 2, 2023, accessed January 27, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/russia-must-stop-using-food-weapon_en.

²⁵ Reuters, “Extracts from Putin’s Speech at Annexation Ceremony,” *Reuters*, September 30, 2022, accessed January 19, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/extracts-putins-speech-annexation-ceremony-2022-09-30/>.

ongoing, and in the same way, it is inherently difficult to identify if, and when, a perceived threat of future action becomes reality.”²⁶ Similarly, David Kilcullen’s concept of “liminal warfare” identifies several levels of attack based on attribution: ranging from clandestine (undetected action) to covert (detected but unattributable action) to ambiguous (detected action with a suspected but unprovable actor) to overt (both action and actor are visible). The gaps between these attack types complicate the challenge of formulating a timely and proportional response without inadvertently or accidentally escalating the conflict. Kilcullen refers to this as the “liminal zone,” a concept closely related to the grey zone.²⁷

Beyond Hybrid CoE’s definition of HT, there are a few additional points to consider. First, it is important to recognize that strategic competition does not always involve state and non-state actors using HT to target populations. Economic competition, treaties, and alliances are all legal activities and part of “normal” international relations. For example, the emergence of BRICS as a challenge to Western economic and financial institutions illustrates strategic competition through lawful and transparent means. In contrast, HT relies on illegal or legally ambiguous (“grey”) activities that are difficult to trace, aiming to target a country’s population and ultimately weaken and limit that state’s ability to project power.

Second, there is disagreement over the use of the term “hybrid threat” to describe these activities. George Kennan, the U.S. diplomat who helped formulate the United States’ post-World War II containment strategy against the Soviet Union, referred to such actions as “political warfare,” a term that remains in use today.²⁸ The U.S. Department of Defense, on the other hand, has adopted the term “irregular warfare” (IW) for activities similar to HT. U.S. Joint Doctrine Publication 1, Volume 1 “Joint Warfighting,” along with the 2020 IW annex to the National Defense Strategy, defines IW as “a struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy.” The definition further explains that “Irregular warfare favors indirect warfare and asymmetric warfare approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities in order to erode the adversary’s power, influence, and will.” In essence, IW shares similar activities and objectives with HT.²⁹

²⁶ Weissmann, “Conceptualizing and Countering Hybrid Threats and Hybrid Warfare,” 63.

²⁷ David Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, March 2020).

²⁸ For Kennan, see: “269. Policy Planning Staff Memorandum,” *Office of the Historian*, May 4, 1948, accessed January 21, 2024, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945-50Intel/d269>. For an example of the use of “political warfare” today, see Linda Robinson et al., “The Growing Need to Focus on Modern Political Warfare,” Research Brief RB-10071-A (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2019), www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10071.html.

²⁹ Currently, the U.S. Department of Defense is working on a new definition of IW.

In addition to the definitional disagreements in the West, China and Russia have developed their own terminology for HT. In 1999, two Chinese theorists, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, introduced the concept of “unrestricted warfare.” They described the “future battlefield as an ‘extended domain,’ not a battlefield where lethality took precedence, but one in which the goal of any nation-state (or sub-state actors) is to ‘paralyze and to undermine the enemy’ by degrading the will of its people and the state to wage an armed conflict in the first place.”³⁰ Similarly, Russian theorist and Chief of the Armed Forces’ General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, has referred to “unrestrictive warfare” to describe Russia’s use of a full spectrum of operations aimed at shaping regions and the international system to Russia’s advantage.³¹

Finally, several scholars advocate for a clear distinction between hybrid threats and hybrid warfare. Weissmann, for instance, references the International Institute for Strategic Studies’ definition of HW to differentiate it from HT:

The use of military and nonmilitary tools in an integrated campaign designed to achieve surprise, seize the initiative and gain psychological as well as physical advantages utilizing diplomatic means; sophisticated and rapid information, electronic and cyber operations; covert and occasionally overt military and intelligence action; and economic pressure.³²

Distinguishing between hybrid threats and hybrid warfare is important in the context of strategic competition. The use of military “tools”—ranging from “non-kinetic” activities like troop positioning to the actual use of force—is generally visible and signals one state’s intentions to another. In contrast, HT is less apparent, complicating detection and making a timely and appropriate response more challenging. Additionally, HW involves directly targeting the population as well as engaging another nation’s military. It is the combination of hybrid threats and kinetic activities, both of which strategically target populations, that makes HW especially difficult to counter and distinct from conventional—what the United States refers to as “traditional”—warfare.

The NATO definition of hybrid warfare captures this complexity, often using the terms hybrid warfare (HW), hybrid threats (HT), and hybrid activities interchangeably:

³⁰ As described by Mark Thomas. See Mark Thomas, “The Chinese Roots of Hybrid Warfare,” *CEPA*, August 10, 2022, accessed January 20, 2024, <https://cepa.org/article/the-chinese-roots-of-hybrid-warfare/>.

³¹ Thomas, “The Chinese Roots of Hybrid Warfare.” See also: ARIS, “*Little Green Men*”: A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014 (Fort Bragg, NC: The United States Army Special Operations Command, 2018), www.soc.mil/ARIS/books/pdf/14-02984_LittleGreenMen-UNCLASS-hi-res.pdf.

³² Weissmann, “Conceptualizing and Countering Hybrid Threats and Hybrid Warfare,” 64.

Hybrid threats combine military and non-military as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyber attacks, economic pressure, deployment of irregular armed groups and use of regular forces. Hybrid methods are used to blur the lines between war and peace, and attempt to sow doubt in the minds of target populations. They aim to destabilise and undermine societies.³³

Despite the overlapping terminology, NATO's definition of hybrid warfare encapsulates the key elements of both hybrid threats and hybrid warfare as discussed here – namely, the combination of non-kinetic and kinetic activities, the primary purpose “to sow doubt in the minds of target populations,” and the overarching objective to “destabilise and undermine societies,” with the ultimate goal of reshaping the regional and global order in favor of the adversary.

From these various definitions, several commonalities emerge that can inform a working definition of HT and HW as they pertain to strategic competition:

- *Perpetrators*: Both state and non-state actors can engage in HT and HW. Non-state actors may operate independently or collaborate loosely with states.
- *Targets*: The primary target of HT and HW is a state's population. Actors exploit key vulnerabilities within these populations through HT and HW activities.
- *Nature of activities*: HT activities typically fall short of open warfare. They are often concealed, and when they are visible, they can be difficult to attribute to a specific actor, complicating responses. HW includes a combination of open warfare and HT activities. The principal target of HW is still populations, which differentiates it from conventional war. While attribution may be known, formulating an effective response that counters both HW and HT activities without escalating the conflict is challenging.
- *Objectives*: The goals of HT and HW are to undermine national unity, sow division within populations, and challenge the legitimacy of governments. Ultimately, these activities aim to compel governments to focus inward on domestic issues, thereby weakening their capacity to project power externally.
- *Impact on strategic competition*: In the context of strategic competition, both HW and HT seek to weaken and divide cooperation among states, including alliances, and to limit collective security efforts in projecting power within the international system. This creates opportunities for actors to reshape the global order in their favor.

³³ “Countering Hybrid Threats,” NATO, August 18, 2023, accessed January 23, 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_156338.htm.

Conclusion

This article posits that, while strategic competition is not a new phenomenon, the ability of state and non-state actors to challenge the international order by directly targeting populations through various hybrid threats and hybrid warfare activities represents a novel development. If the primary target of HT and HW is indeed a state's population, then effectively countering these threats necessitates preparing and strengthening populations against such attacks – this is what “societal resilience” means.

While the topic of building societal resilience warrants a comprehensive manuscript of its own, this article concludes by identifying three key measures that states can adopt to enhance societal resilience. First, governments should prioritize building awareness and resilience against disinformation and mal-information campaigns, which may represent one of the most significant HT challenges countries face today. This enormous undertaking encompasses a wide range of efforts, from addressing the cognitive effects of social media and developing critical thinking skills among populations to countering the erosion of trust in traditional sources of information, including the press and government institutions.

Second, governments should focus on enhancing resilience within their critical infrastructure and key services. NATO's baseline requirements for national resilience identify seven key areas:

- Assured continuity of government and critical government services
- Resilient energy supplies
- Effective management of uncontrolled movement of people
- Resilient food and water resources
- Capacity to address mass casualties
- Robust civil communications systems
- Resilient civil transportation systems.³⁴

To this list, it is essential to add the ability of governments to provide credible information, as this capability is crucial for strengthening resilience against disinformation and mal-information.

Third, governments should take proactive steps to prepare their populations for the possibility of war, including the grim reality of nuclear conflict. On January 7, 2024, Sweden's Civil Defense Minister, Carl-Oskar Bohlin, and Chief of Defense, Micael Bydén, publicly urged Swedish citizens to mentally prepare for the possibility of war as the country finalized its NATO membership. This

³⁴ Wolf-Diether Roepke and Hasit Thankey, “Resilience: The First Line of Defence,” *NATO Review*, February 27, 2019, accessed January 28, 2024, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2019/02/27/resilience-the-first-line-of-defence/index.html>.

announcement caused a stir in Sweden.³⁵ However, preparing one's population for a range of hybrid threats, along with the potential for warfare that intentionally targets civilians, is essential for building resilience against both hybrid threats and hybrid warfare.

These are just three areas where all states should focus on building societal resilience to defend against hybrid threats and the potential for hybrid warfare. Given that populations are the primary targets of these threats, governments must actively engage with their citizens to mitigate the impact of HT and prepare for the realities of HW.

Disclaimer

The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not represent official views of the PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, participating organizations, or the Consortium's editors.

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³⁵ Hope O'Dell, "Why Is Sweden Telling Its Citizens to Prepare for War?" *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, January 24, 2024, accessed January 28, 2024, <https://globalaffairs.org/bluemarble/sweden-tells-citizens-prepare-war-russian-aggression-nato-membership>.



Strategic Competition and the Battle of Narratives: A Sociopsychological Perspective

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Abstract: Strategic competition and the concept of being in a struggle currently shape the mindsets and the construction of the social reality of policymakers, academics, and the public. This article analyzes how U.S. policymakers and analysts, the Russian leadership, and the Chinese Communist Party perceive the current security situation. It also explores the often-underestimated role of strategic narratives. By summarizing the key points of the strategic narratives of the United States, Russia, and China, the article discusses the implications of the competitive mindset on humanity's ability to address essential global security challenges.

Keywords: strategic narratives, competition, cooperation, China, Russia, United States.

Strategic Competition – the New Reality?

The security policy world has entered a new reality. The 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy (US NSS) outlines the current dilemma faced by policymakers and their advisors.¹ On one hand, it states that the world is “in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order.”² On the other hand,

¹ Although “strategic competition” is a Western (U.S.) concept, other major global actors, such as the Chinese Communist Party and the leadership of the Russian Federation, share the general idea of a world where powers are in a struggle. This article delves deeper into the respective concepts while discussing narratives in strategic competition.

² *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, October 2022), 2, accessed June 19, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

challenges like climate change “demand increased global cooperation.”³ This dilemma arises from the different logic and modes of interaction involved in cooperation and competition.

The Pentagon’s *Joint Concept for Competing* defines strategic competition as “a persistent and long-term struggle that occurs between two or more adversaries seeking to pursue incompatible interests without necessarily engaging in armed conflict with each other.”⁴ This definition closely aligns with the sociological understanding of struggle and conflict. In this context, both terms describe not only violent conflict but also social interactions involving conflicting interests, with the primary goal being the realization of each actor’s interests – thus defining the situation in which the interaction takes place as “strategic.”

The *Joint Concept for Competing* also recognizes the existence of “normal and peaceful competition among allies, strategic partners, and other international actors who are not potentially hostile.”⁵ And it even opens the possibility for cooperation when interests are compatible or “coincide.”⁶ Hence, by adopting a (strategic) competition mindset,⁷ actors place the realization of their interests as the overarching objective at the center of their deliberations. For them, strategic competition is “an enduring condition to be managed, not a problem to be solved.”⁸ As a consequence of this perception, actors apply a “strategic”⁹ logic to interaction, framing social situations as conflict or struggle.¹⁰ However, this logic often impedes or even excludes the possibility of global cooperation, which would require a logic of interaction that prioritizes collective or even global interests over individual ones.

The strategic logic of interaction is not confined to decision-makers or the military. Within the West, the narrative of strategic competition increasingly re-

³ *National Security Strategy*, 2022.

⁴ “Joint Concept for Competing,” Joint Chiefs of Staff, February 10, 2023, 1, accessed June 22, 2024, <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/23698400/20230213-joint-concept-for-competing-signed.pdf>.

⁵ “Joint Concept for Competing.”

⁶ “Joint Concept for Competing,” iii.

⁷ “Joint Concept for Competing,” iv.

⁸ “Joint Concept for Competing,” 7.

⁹ In this article, we use the term “strategic” in the tradition of Jürgen Habermas’s theory of communicative action (“Theorie kommunikativen Handelns”). According to Habermas, “strategic action” is a mode of interaction in which an actor aims to realizing their own interests (“teleological action”) rather than seeking a common understanding of the situation (i.e., cooperation). Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Band 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995), 390 and 396.

¹⁰ In this article, the terms “conflict” and “struggle” are used in a sociological sense. This means they do not exclusively refer to violent conflict but rather to social interactions involving conflicting interests, where the primary goal of the actors is to pursue their respective interests.

places those about the benefits of cooperation and globalization.¹¹ European scholar Mark Leonard even refers to this shift as a “connectivity conundrum.”¹² He argues that the high degree of connectivity achieved through the ongoing process of globalization cannot be used for either “good or ill” but instead exacerbates conflict.¹³ Summarizing the current situation, Leonard concludes that connectivity “gives people the opportunity for conflict; the reasons to fight each other; and a lot of weapons with which to inflict harm.”¹⁴

A number of developments and incidents drives this change in perception. Important examples include Russia’s attempts to control the post-Soviet space by weaponizing existing interdependencies¹⁵ (e.g., against Moldova or Georgia), culminating in the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022, China’s shift in policy and increasingly assertive behavior after Xi took office as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012 and the disruption of supply chains, as well as nationalist and self-centered mitigation strategies of countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown above, the United States adopts a relatively binary approach, distinguishing between allies, partners, and adversaries, with whom limited cooperation in certain areas could be possible if national interests coincide.¹⁶

¹¹ Mark Leonard, *The Age of Unpeace: How Connectivity Causes Conflict* (London: Penguin Random House, 2022), 9.

¹² Leonard, *The Age of Unpeace*, 1-18.

¹³ Leonard, *The Age of Unpeace*, 9f. An alternative perspective and a possible solution of the dilemma can be found in Zhao Tingyang, *Alles unter dem Himmel. Vergangenheit und Zukunft der Weltordnung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2020), 17-21.

¹⁴ See Leonard, *The Age of Unpeace*, 10.

¹⁵ See, for example, the work of Tatyana Novossiolova and Goran Georgiev, “Countering Hybrid Warfare in the Black Sea Region: Strengthening Institutional Frameworks for Protection and Resilience” (Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023), accessed August 29, 2024, <https://csd.eu/publications/publication/countering-hybrid-warfare-in-the-black-sea-region/>; “Energy (In)Security and Good Governance in Moldova: Making the Energy Transition Possible,” *Policy Brief* No. 143, Center for the Study of Democracy, January 19, 2024, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://csd.eu/publications/publication/energy-insecurity-and-good-governance-in-moldova-making-the-energy-transition-possible/>.

¹⁶ See “Joint Concept for Competing,” 1; *National Security Strategy*, 2; Patrick Quirk and Caitlin Dearing Scott, “Maximizing US Foreign Aid for Strategic Competition,” Report, Atlantic Council, June 29, 2023, accessed August 29, 2024, www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/maximizing-us-foreign-aid-for-strategic-competition/; “FMS 2023: Retooling Foreign Military Sales for An Age of Strategic Competition,” Fact Sheet, U.S. Department of State, May 18, 2023, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/fms-2023-retooling-foreign-military-sales-for-an-age-of-strategic-competition/>; Jessica Lewis, “The Future of Security Assistance in an Era of Strategic Competition,” U.S. Department of State, December 5, 2023, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/the-future-of-security-assistance-in-an-era-of-strategic-competition/>.

The European Union, as another important Western player, is adopting a more nuanced approach to addressing the challenges arising from the developments described above. While acknowledging the competitive dimension in international relations, EU member states, for example, have categorized Russia as a “long-term and direct threat to European security”¹⁷ and China as “a partner for cooperation, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival.”¹⁸ Especially the perception of China as a systemic rival is a new development, reflecting a reaction to the resurgence of socialist ideology within the Chinese Communist Party after Xi became General Secretary in 2012 (“Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”).¹⁹ EU member states now view themselves as being engaged in a “fierce”²⁰ or “real battle of narratives”²¹ in a global “competition of governance systems.”²²

Interestingly, the Chinese Communist Party under Xi, while again strictly applying historical and dialectic materialism as the foundation of socialist theory, interprets global developments in a way almost similar to the EU’s perspective. By constructing social reality as a systemic struggle between communism with Chinese characteristics and Western political ideas,²³ it still manages to permit cooperation with its systemic rivals. This flexibility arises because socialism accommodates ambiguity, conceptualizing social reality as a set of contradictions

¹⁷ “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence,” European External Action Service, March 24, 2022, accessed June 23 2024, 18, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-0_en.

¹⁸ “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence.” An interesting perspective on the EU’s early attempts to forge a strategic narrative on EU-China relations can be found in Alister Miskimmon and Ben O’Loughlin, “The EU’s Struggle for a Strategic Narrative on China,” in *One Belt, One Road, One Story? Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative*, ed. Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Jinghan Zeng (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, December 2021), 19-43, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-53153-9>.

¹⁹ The role of socialism in the Chinese Communist Party has long been underestimated by Western scholars and observers. This has changed since Xi Jinping placed “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” at the center of Chinese policy. For example, see Daniel Tobin, “How Xi Jinping’s ‘New Era’ Should Have Ended U.S. Debate of Beijing’s Ambitions,” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, May 8, 2020, accessed June 23, 2024, www.csis.org/analysis/how-xi-jinpings-new-era-should-have-ended-us-debate-beijings-ambitions.

²⁰ “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence,” 4.

²¹ “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence,” 14.

²² “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence.”

²³ See for example Shiu Sin Por, “Tianxia: China’s Concept of International Order,” *Global Asia*, accessed August 29, 2024, https://www.globalasia.org/v15no2/cover/tianxia-chinas-concept-of-international-order_shiu-sin-por or Tingyang Zhao, “Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept ‘All-under-Heaven’ (Tian-xia, 天下),” *Social Identities* 12, no. 1 (January 2006): 29-41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630600555559>.

that do not require immediate resolution. Additionally, Chinese culture (i.e., the “Chinese Characteristics”) is highly tolerant of ambiguity.²⁴

In this regard, the mindset of the Russian leadership differs from the Chinese perspective. Although both perceive themselves as being in a struggle with the political West, particularly the “Anglo-Saxons,”²⁵ the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese thinkers view their system as being superior to liberalism and Western democracy.²⁶ Therefore, they actively promote an alternative that they believe is more suitable for solving global problems.²⁷ The Chinese Communist Party perceives itself as being in the role of the active challenger in this context.

²⁴ Delving deeper into Chinese cultural aspects, such as philosophical Daoism or the complexities of “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” would exceed the scope of this article. Interested readers may find a useful overview in Tobin’s article, “How Xi Jinping’s ‘New Era’ Should Have Ended U.S. Debate of Beijing’s Ambitions.” It is also advisable to consult original Chinese reports, which are available in English. See, for example, the “Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” <https://english.www.gov.cn/2022special/20thcpccongress/>. A summary of the results of the 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party can be found in “Key Takeaways from Xi’s Report to the Party Congress,” *Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS)*, October 20, 2022, accessed June 23, 2024, <https://merics.org/en/merics-briefs/key-takeaways-xis-report-party-congress>. For a general overview of Daoism, see <https://iep.utm.edu/daoismdaoist-philosophy/> (accessed June 23, 2024).

²⁵ For the use of the term “Anglo-Saxons,” see for example Stefano Caprio, “Showdown with the ‘Anglosaksy,’” *AsiaNews*, May 21, 2022, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.asia-news.it/news-en/Showdown-with-the-Anglosaksy-55856.html>.

²⁶ In this context, influential Chinese thinkers like Tingyang Zhao propose a revised version of the historic Chinese idea of *tian xia* (天下, “all under heaven”) and explain its superiority. See Zhao, *Alles unter dem Himmel. Vergangenheit und Zukunft der Weltordnung*, 13-36, or Zhao, “Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept ‘All-under-Heaven,’” 29-41. Many Western recipients of the “All-Under-Heaven” idea unfortunately do not take the time to delve into Chinese philosophy and, as a result, are either unable or unwilling to grasp the complexity and benefits of the concept. Consequently, in the Western discourse, “All-Under-Heaven” is often reduced to a limited understanding of a tribute-system with China at the center. For example, see Didi Kirsten Tatlow, “China’s Cosmological Communism: A Challenge to Liberal Democracies – Imperial Philosophy Meets Marxist Orthodoxy in Beijing’s Global Ambitions,” *MERICS*, July 18, 2018, accessed June 23, 2024, <https://merics.org/en/report/chinas-cosmological-communism-challenge-liberal-democracies>.

²⁷ In his report to the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party Xi points out that “the path, the theory, the system, and the culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics have kept developing, blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization. It offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind.” “Full Text of Xi Jinping’s Report at 19th CPC National Congress,” *China Daily*, November 4, 2017, accessed June 23, 2024, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm.

On the contrary, the Russian leadership sees itself on the defensive, engaged in an existential fight and as a victim of a Western attack.²⁸ One essential element of the perceived threat to Russian or “Eurasian” civilization and identity is Western cultural influence. Russian thinkers like Andrey Ilnitsky blame the West for forging a “global war for hegemony”²⁹ and a “mental war”³⁰ against Russia and the rest of the world. Ilnitsky accuses the West of destroying the identity of non-Western individuals, societies, and countries by undermining their faith, culture, and moral and religious foundations, eroding their political systems, and discrediting their intellectual foundations, including science, interpretation of history, ideology, and the education system. Thus, according to Ilnitsky, these efforts would undermine societal trust and social stability, ultimately provoking the collapse of the targeted society and state, which would then be replaced by a Western-style system. In his construction of a large-scale Western influence operation, Ilnitsky highlights both the individual and societal levels, as well as the interaction between the two.³¹

Although the idea of a Western “mental war” on Russia and other countries may seem far-fetched, it nonetheless highlights the importance of the sociopsychological dimension in strategic competition, as will be illustrated in the following paragraphs. To fully grasp the impact of the current shift in how global processes are perceived, it is essential to understand the mental and sociopsychological processes that construct social reality and guide the human mind and behavior of actors.

Constructing Social Reality

Mental Processes and the Role of Concepts

Like in other disciplines, psychology and neuroscience feature several, often contradicting, theories about mental processes. Scientists such as Lisa Feldman Bar-

²⁸ See the speech of the Russian President Putin at the 2007 Munich Security Conference: “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy,” *President of Russia Official Website*, February 10, 2007, accessed June 23, 2024, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>; or his interview with Tucker Carlson 2024: “Interview to Tucker Carlson,” *President of Russia Official Website*, February 9, 2024, accessed June 23, 2024, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/73411>.

²⁹ Andrey Ilnitsky, “The Antichrist as a Technology,” <https://www.vision-gt.eu/news/the-antichrist-as-a-technology/>, February 6, 2024, accessed June 23, 2024. Also available in Russian: <https://www.pnp.ru/politics/antikhris-kak-tekhnologiya.html>.

³⁰ Ilnitsky, “The Antichrist as a Technology.”

³¹ Ilnitsky, “The Antichrist as a Technology.”

rett³² and Luiz Pessoa³³ advocate for a systemic approach to explain brain activity, rather than the functionalist or mechanistic linear models that conceptualize the brain as an information-processing machine. Scientific evidence supports the idea of the brain functioning as a “prediction device”³⁴ or “prediction machine.”³⁵ In this context, affects and “interoception,”³⁶ which form the basis for the construction of emotions, play an essential role.³⁷ By generating predictions, the brain can decouple sensory inputs from behavioral outputs, enabling organisms to adapt to changing situations.³⁸ The brain’s anatomy suggests that sensory inputs from the outside world play a secondary role, while the majority of neurons are involved in prediction processes.³⁹ Thus, the brain actively constructs reality rather than merely reacting to sensory inputs.⁴⁰ These constructs rely on mental conceptualizations of the world, such as concepts of structures, processes, emotions, and more.⁴¹ Consequently, organisms like humans do not perceive an objective reality but what the brain, based on concepts, predicts to be real – a “controlled hallucination.”⁴² The brain’s concept-based model of the world is actively refined through feedback or prediction loops triggered by sensory input, known as “prediction errors.”⁴³ The unique ability of humans to share their concepts and understanding of (social) situations through language (i.e., narratives) transforms these constructed realities into shared social realities. According to Feldman Barrett, the use of shared and synchronized concepts is a prerequisite for successful communication.⁴⁴ These shared and synchronized concepts are conveyed through narratives (see Figure 1).

³² See Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* (London, UK: Pan Books, 2018), 22-24, for different theories on “emotions.” Also, see Nil Seth, *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness* (London, UK: Faber & Faber, 2021), 11-31, for discussion on functionalist, physicalist (i.e., materialist), idealist, dualist, and phenomenological approaches.

³³ Luiz Pessoa, *The Entangled Brain: How Perception, Cognition, and Emotion Are Woven Together* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2022), 7-13, <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14636.001.0001>.

³⁴ Pessoa, *The Entangled Brain*, 125; Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 86.

³⁵ Seth, *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness*, 76 and 112f.

³⁶ Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 56f.

³⁷ Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 72ff.

³⁸ Pessoa, *The Entangled Brain*, 34.

³⁹ Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 61, Figure 4-1.

⁴⁰ Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 59f and Pessoa, *The Entangled Brain*, 126.

⁴¹ Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 85-94.

⁴² Seth, *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness*, 76ff, 273.

⁴³ Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 62.

⁴⁴ Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 94.

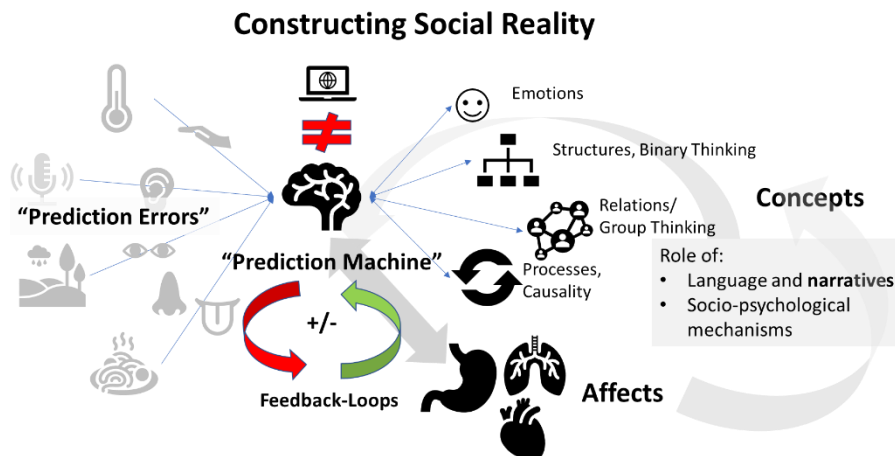


Figure 1: Constructing Social Reality.

The Role of Narratives

“Narrative” in this context is a neutral term.⁴⁵ Narratives fulfill an essential communicative function.⁴⁶ They are much more than just stories because they create social reality for humans, forming the foundation of their identity, beliefs, and behavior. Narratives integrate and sequence events and incidents, establishing a causal relationship between them. A narrative includes structural elements such as characters⁴⁷ or actors, scenes and settings, obstacles and challenges to overcome, tools or methods to achieve goals, and desired or feared end-states. Humans are surrounded by narratives throughout their lives. Parents share nar-

⁴⁵ It is important to conceptualize narratives as something neutral, because in political debates, narratives are sometimes associated with disinformation and manipulation attempts (for example, see Joshua Kroeker, “A War of Narratives: Russia’s Disinformation Abuses History,” *New Eastern Europe*, January 23, 2023, accessed June 19, 2024, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2023/01/23/a-war-of-narratives-russias-disinformation-abuses-history/>). Framing narratives in this way reduces them to a strategic means, which is a very limited perspective that unnecessarily confines the explanatory power of the concept. An overview of the use of narratives as a political tool can be found in Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁴⁶ Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, 369ff, and Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 84ff and 128ff.

⁴⁷ These “characters” are sometimes very generalized. In conspiracy theories, there might be the “enlightened” and the “evil elites,” the “globalists,” etc. In other narratives, there are the “good” and “the evil.” These generalized characters are often used to create in-groups and out-groups. One illustrative example of this is Ilnitsky, “The Antichrist as a Technology.”

ratives with their children to explain the world, while peers use and create narratives during adolescence to make sense of their experiences. Narratives evoke emotions,⁴⁸ construct social reality,⁴⁹ and build shared group identities. Narratives combine and integrate pieces of information, explain certain events, and arrange them in a logical order. During this process, narrative creators define the identities of certain actors and offer explanations for their motivations.

Narratives operate on different levels. On the individual level, they construct personal identity, create a meaningful biography (i.e., help individuals make sense of their lives), and justify past and future actions. On the group level, narratives construct social reality, generate group identities, foster “collective intentionality,”⁵⁰ and establish intersubjectivity, all of which support human interaction and communication.⁵¹ In addition to their general communicative and social functions, narratives can also be used as strategic⁵² instruments to influence and shape the social reality of a target audience, thereby affecting its behavior.

Narratives as an Instrument in Strategic Competition

Strategic Narratives

A political or strategic narrative is “a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors.”⁵³ These narratives are tailored to specific audiences. They utilize, adapt, and manipulate⁵⁴ existing narratives, thereby

⁴⁸ In academic discourse, the definition of “emotion,” whether they are “real,” and how they are linked to and connected with perception and cognition are subjects of ongoing debate (see, for example, Lisa Feldman Barrett, “Emotions are Real,” *Emotion* 12, no. 3 (2012): 413-429, <https://www.affective-science.org/pubs/2012/emotions-are-real.pdf>). We will revisit the function of emotions in the cognitive dimension and in narratives later in this article.

⁴⁹ Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 128ff.

⁵⁰ Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 135.

⁵¹ Also see Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Jinghan Zeng, “Introduction,” in *One Belt, One Road, One Story? Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative*, 6. For a general overview, see Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit: Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1980).

⁵² For the use of the term “strategic,” see footnote 9.

⁵³ Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, 2.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Teun A. van Dijk, “Discourse and Manipulation,” *Discourse & Society* 17, no 3 (2006): 359-388, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926506060250>. For the increasingly relevant topic of manipulation through gaming, see, for example Willy Christian Kritz, Toshiko Kikkawa, and Junkichi Sugiura, “Manipulation Through Gamification and Gaming,” in *Gaming as a Cultural Commons*, ed. Toshiko Kikkawa, Willy Christian Kriz, and Junkichi Sugiura (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022), 185-199, or Benjamin Möbus, “‘Würden wir die Rolle von Computerspielen nicht für wichtig erachten, würden wir nicht tun, was wir tun’ – Die Identitäre Bewegung und das propa-

shaping the social reality of the target audience according to the strategic objectives of the narrator. Such attempts are more convincing when supported by coherent actions, concrete examples, or credible evidence.⁵⁵ When actors use narratives strategically, they aim to convince or persuade others that their understanding and perception of the world are correct while those of others are wrong. By employing strategic narratives, actors can influence and shape the concepts that form the foundation of social reality, the interpretation of situations and events, and the behavior of others. This makes strategic narratives powerful tools in strategic competition. The ultimate goal of narrative crafters is to achieve interpretative dominance over the social reality in their target audiences. Viable options for achieving this dominance include controlling the narrative by restricting the target audiences' information space,⁵⁶ crafting a more appealing and convincing narrative than that of an opponent,⁵⁷ or undermining an opponent's narrative through information manipulation and interference.⁵⁸

Competing strategic narratives often draw on the same observations but charge them with different meanings. An illustrative example is the completely

gandistische Potential von Computerspielen am Beispiel von Heimat Defender: Rebellion," *ZepRA* 2, no. 1 (2023): 4-49, <https://www.zepa-journal.de/index.php/zepra/issue/view/5/2>.

⁵⁵ This idea represents a comprehensive approach to strategic communication, emphasizing that all interaction is a form of communication.

⁵⁶ A widely used method to restrict the information space is the so-called "foreign agent" legislation. Examples include the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act (see "What is FARA?" *FARA.us*, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.fara.us/>), the Russian Foreign Agent Law (see Human Rights Watch, "Russia: New Restrictions for 'Foreign Agents': Foreign Influence Would Now Suffice for Toxic Designation," December 1, 2022, accessed June 24, 2024, www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/01/russia-new-restrictions-foreign-agents), as well as similar legislation in China (see Tom Phillips, "China Passes Law Imposing Security Controls on Foreign NGOs," *The Guardian*, April 28, 2016, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/28/china-passes-law-imposing-security-controls-on-foreign-ngos>) and Georgia (see Rayhan Demytrie and Emily Atkinson, "Georgia Approves Controversial 'Foreign Agent' Law, Sparking More Protests," *BBC*, May 14, 2024, accessed June 24, 2024, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-69007465). The EU is currently debating foreign agent registration legislation to limit foreign information manipulation and interference activities (see Mared Gwyn Jones, "Planned EU Foreign Influence Law Will Not Criminalise or Discriminate, Brussels Says," *EuroNews*, December 12, 2023, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/12/12/planned-eu-foreign-influence-law-will-not-criminalise-or-discriminate-brussels-says>).

⁵⁷ The "American Dream" is an example of a successful narrative. See "What Is the American Dream? Examples and How to Measure It," *Investopedia*, July 2, 2024, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/a/american-dream.asp>.

⁵⁸ One technique for undermining domestic narratives is "foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI)." European Union External Action Service, "1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats: Towards a Framework for Networked Defence," February 7, 2023, accessed June 26, 2024, www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/1st-eeas-report-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats_en.

different interpretation of reality in Europe after the end of the Cold War by NATO member states and the Russian leadership. While the political West interprets the accession of former Warsaw Pact states to NATO (referred to as NATO “enlargement”) as a process aimed “at promoting stability and cooperation, at building a Europe whole and free, united in peace, democracy and common values,”⁵⁹ the Russian leadership views the same development as an aggressive act and a threat to its existence,⁶⁰ labeling it NATO “expansion.” In this context, the Russian president pointed out in his 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference: “I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust.”⁶¹

While the interpretations of reality and the respective narratives may differ significantly, both can evoke strong emotions in their target audiences by leveraging the basic sociopsychological mechanism of in-group and out-group thinking. The Western concept of “NATO enlargement” and the resulting perception of reality builds on a positive vision, evoking positive emotions such as happiness and anticipation, generating a sense of hope,⁶² and creating a strong in-group with common values. In contrast, the reality conveyed by the Russian perception of “NATO expansion” centers on the strong emotion of fear, constructing an in-group that feels threatened by an aggressive out-group.

The fear- and threat-centric Russian narrative also resonates with specific anti-U.S. (or anti-“Anglo-Saxon”⁶³) audiences in the West,⁶⁴ who feel alienated

⁵⁹ “Enlargement and Article 10,” NATO, March 8, 2024, accessed April 25, 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49212.htm.

⁶⁰ See the speech by Russian President Putin at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy.” Also, see Ted Galen Carpenter, “Many Predicted NATO Expansion Would Lead to War. Those Warnings Were Ignored,” *The Guardian*, February 28, 2022, accessed June 25, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/28/nato-expansion-war-russia-ukraine>.

⁶¹ See the speech by Russian President Putin at the 2007 Munich Security Conference.

⁶² For the construction of the concept of “hope,” see Warren TenHouten, “The Emotions of Hope: From Optimism to Sanguinity, from Pessimism to Despair,” *The American Sociologist* 54 (2023): 76-100, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-022-09544-1>. Whether hope is an emotion is debatable. TenHouten himself categorizes hope as an assessment rather than an emotion.

⁶³ Caprio, “Showdown with the ‘Anglosaksy’.”

⁶⁴ These groups include both far-right and left-wing parties and factions in Europe. While the anti-liberal, anti-U.S. narratives were not created by Russia and have been shared by these groups for decades, Russia supports these audiences to foster polarization in Europe. In this context, the exposure of the Russian-controlled platform “Voice of Europe” provides valuable insights into Russian influence operations in the West. See Nicholas Vinocur, Pieter Haeck, and Eddy Wax, “Russian Influence Scandal Rocks EU,” *Politico*, March 29, 2024, accessed April 29, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/voice-of-europe-russia-influence-scandal-election/>.

by a liberal Western lifestyle. It is difficult to determine whether the positive, hope-centered, or negative, fear-based approach to crafting narratives and constructing reality is more effective. However, NATO and, to some extent, the European Union are increasingly adopting a more fear-based construction of reality, reflecting the perception of Russia as a significant threat.⁶⁵

The Battle of Narratives

As mentioned above, major global players perceive themselves as being engaged in a struggle. The battle of narratives is in full swing, with actors such as the United States, Russia, and China actively crafting their strategic narratives. They aim to persuade specific target audiences of their respective perspectives and, in doing so, win dominance in the competition for interpretation across different parts of the world. Each of these actors expects to garner active support for their position.

US Narrative

U.S. authors and officials have tried to influence perceptions of China's rise by highlighting the potential danger of a high-intensity military conflict between the United States and China through the narrative of the "Thucydides's Trap"⁶⁶ or

⁶⁵ NATO, "Relations with Russia," last updated August 5, 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50090.htm. It seems to be a common basic assumption in security policy debates that a shared perception of a threat is a prerequisite for the willingness to engage in collective action. One example of this is the article by Jan Joel Andersson, "Defence: Solidarity, Trust and Threat Perception," *EUISS Alert* 33, July 2015, accessed April 30, 2024, https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISS_Files/Alert_33_Transatlantic_defence.pdf.

⁶⁶ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017). For the discussion on a potential military conflict between the United States and China see: "The Tiger Project: War and Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific," Atlantic Council, accessed August 29, 2024, www.atlanticcouncil.org/the-tiger-project-war-and-deterrence-in-the-indo-pacific/; Aaron L. Friedberg, "What's at Stake in the Indo-Pacific: What Happens at Sea Will Determine What Happens on Land Across the Region," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 147, no. 10 (October 2021): 1, 424, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/october/whats-stake-indo-pacific>; Joseph Clark, "U.S. Focuses on Deterrence as China Raises Stakes in Indo-Pacific," *U.S. Department of Defense*, October 24, 2024, www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3566970/us-focuses-on-deterrence-as-china-raises-stakes-in-indo-pacific/; Courtney Kube and Mosheh Gains, "Air Force General Predicts War with China in 2025, Tells Officers to Prep by Firing 'a Clip' at a Target, and 'Aim for the Head'," *NBC News*, January 28, 2023, www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/us-air-force-general-predicts-war-china-2025-memo-rcna67967; Unshin Lee Harpley, "INDOPACOM Boss on China: 'Haven't Faced a Threat Like This Since World War II'," *Air & Space Force Magazine*, March 21, 2024, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/indopacom-boss-china-threat-world-war-ii/>; full statement of Admiral Aquilino can be accessed at www.armed-services.senate.gov/download/aquilino-statement-032124.

the threat of Chinese “dept-trap diplomacy.”⁶⁷ While the target audience for “Thucydides’s Trap” is somewhat broad, the “dept-trap diplomacy” narrative is specifically designed to evoke fear in the Global South and to undermine the Chinese narrative of “blazing a new [and independent] trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization.”⁶⁸ On the other hand, the United States, together with other liberal democracies, continues to uphold a positive vision of a democratic world, which retains strong appeal in the Global South.⁶⁹

The Russian Narrative

As shown earlier, the Russian narrative is fear-based and portrays Russia as a victim.⁷⁰ Authors like Andrey Ilnitsky conceptualize Russia as a spiritual state-civilization,⁷¹ which stands in stark contrast to the United States and its allies. He depicts the competition between Russia and the United States as a battle between good and evil. David Lewis describes the ideas underpinning the Russian

⁶⁷ For example, see Michal Himmer and Zdeněk Rod, “Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy: Reality or Myth?” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 18, no. 3 (2022): 250-272, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2023.2195280>, 252f; Mark Green, “China’s Debt Diplomacy: How Belt and Road Threatens Countries’ Ability to Achieve Self-reliance,” *Foreign Policy*, April 25, 2019, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/25/chinas-debt-diplomacy/>; “Biden Jabs at China ‘Dept-trap Diplomacy’ at Americas Summit,” *The Japanese Times*, November 4, 2024, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/business/2023/11/04/economy/joe-biden-south-central-america-china-debt-trap/>; “Remarks by President Biden Before the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity Leaders’ Summit,” *The White House*, November 3, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/11/03/remarks-by-president-biden-before-the-americas-partnership-for-economic-prosperity-leaders-summit/>; “Remarks by Secretary of the Treasury Janet L. Yellen on the U.S.-China Economic Relationship,” *U.S. Embassy & Consulates in China*, April 21, 2023, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/remarks-by-secretary-of-the-treasury-janet-l-yellen-on-the-u-s-china-economic-relationship/>.

⁶⁸ See footnote 27.

⁶⁹ Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Edem E. Selormey, “AD489: Africans Welcome China’s Influence but Maintain Democratic Aspirations,” *Afrobarometer, Dispatch* No. 489, November 15, 2021, accessed June 24, 2024, www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad489-africans-welcome-chinas-influence-maintain-democratic-aspirations/.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Benjamin R. Young, “Putin Has a Grimly Absolute Vision of the ‘Russian World’: The Ukraine War Is Fueled by a Delusion of Civilizational Necessity,” *Foreign Policy*, March 6, 2022, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/06/russia-putin-civilization/>.

⁷¹ In this context, Ilnitsky uses the term “Russkiy mir” to “denote a cultural, geopolitical and religious concept by unification of the whole Russian-speaking population.” See Ilnitsky, “The Antichrist as a Technology.” For the concept of “Russkiy mir” see also Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group, “How the Kremlin Promotes ‘Russkiy Mir,’” *Ukraine Crisis Media Center*, May 21, 2021, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://uacrisis.org/en/how-the-kremlin-promotes-russkiy-mir/>; or Alexander Meinenberger, “The Russkiy Mir Foundation: State Politics Through Cultural Endeavors?” *Religion in Praxis*, April 16, 2024, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://religioninpraxis.com/the-russkiy-mir-foundation-state-politics-through-cultural-endeavors/>.

narrative as a “toxic mix of pseudo-science, [anti-American] conspiracy theories, and apocalyptic geopolitics.”⁷² According to Lewis, the three main building blocks of the Russian ideological framework are Russian exceptionalism,⁷³ radical geopolitics (including the idea of a Eurasian geopolitical space), and traditional values. The sense of Russian exceptionalism has intensified in recent years, as Russia views itself as one of the few actors capable of countering the West, based on its perceived cultural and spiritual superiority. The “defeat of the West” is seen as “Russia’s Peacekeeping Mission.”⁷⁴

While the Russian narrative primarily targets a domestic audience, the ideas it conveys are also shared with anti-Western audiences across the globe. In these communities, it influences policy developments and decision-making, such as breaking ties with Western countries, as seen in Mali, or the wave of recent coups in African states.⁷⁵ Examples like the “Voice of Europe”⁷⁶ platform demonstrate that Russia actively attempts to influence external discourses, thereby shaping the underlying narratives and perceptions of reality in other countries.⁷⁷ Additionally, Russia increasingly exerts control over its internal narrative by aligning history books and education with state ideology.⁷⁸ The Russian leadership has intensified these efforts since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including initiatives like the ongoing militarization of children.⁷⁹

The Chinese Narrative

As mentioned above, Russia has portrayed NATO, and especially the United States, as a security threat for nearly two decades. In this regard, it shares some common ground with the Chinese Communist Party’s perception. The similarities between both views are outlined in the 2022 “Joint Statement of the Russian

⁷² David Lewis, “Can Russia Develop a New State Ideology?” *RUSI*, January 17, 2023, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/can-russia-develop-new-state-ideology>. Evidence supporting Lewis’s assessment can be found in the article by Ilnitsky, “The Antichrist as a Technology.”

⁷³ Ilnitsky, for example, states: “We must realize the spiritual basis of Russia and the ‘Russkiy mir,’ understand and accept that we are all God-chosen people.” Ilnitsky, “The Antichrist as a Technology.”

⁷⁴ Ilnitsky, “The Antichrist as a Technology.”

⁷⁵ Mariel Ferragamo, “Russia’s Growing Footprint in Africa,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 28, 2023, accessed June 25, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/background-er/russias-growing-footprint-africa>.

⁷⁶ Vinocur, Haeck, and Wax, “Russian Influence Scandal Rocks EU.”

⁷⁷ European Union External Action Service, “1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats,” 9.

⁷⁸ “Russia to Hike Spending on ‘Patriotic Education’ Fourfold – RBC,” *The Moscow Times*, October 9, 2023, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/10/09/russia-to-hike-spending-on-patriotic-education-fourfold-rbc-a82703>.

⁷⁹ Alla Hurska, “Generation Z: Russia’s Militarization of Children,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 20, no. 134, August 18, 2023, <https://jamestown.org/program/generation-z-russias-militarization-of-children/>.

Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development.”⁸⁰ In paragraph III of the Joint Statement, both parties express their concerns regarding international security challenges, two of which are directly linked to the West. The first concern is the fear of “color revolutions”⁸¹ initiated by external forces. The second is the accusation that the West is endangering the security of others:

The sides believe that certain States, military and political alliances and coalitions seek to obtain, directly or indirectly, unilateral military advantages to the detriment of the security of others, including by employing unfair competition practices, intensify geopolitical rivalry, fuel antagonism and confrontation, and seriously undermine the international security order and global strategic stability. The sides oppose further enlargement of NATO and call on the North Atlantic Alliance to abandon its ideologized cold war approaches, to respect the sovereignty, security and interests of other countries, the diversity of their civilizational, cultural and historical backgrounds, and to exercise a fair and objective attitude towards the peaceful development of other States.⁸²

Besides the similarities between Russia and China, this paragraph also highlights their differences. While Russia views the United States and the West as an existential threat, China perceives them more as obstacles to its own development and its vision for other states' progress – key elements of its internal and external narrative.⁸³ Unlike the Russian perception, which is based on a mix of various ideas but lacks a clear vision for the future, the narrative crafted by the Chinese Communist Party is very coherent. Good representations of the internal narrative include the Party's “resolutions on history”⁸⁴ and the reports of the General Secretary to the National Congress of the Communist Party of China.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development,” President of Russia, February 4, 2022, accessed December 12, 2024, www.en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770.

⁸¹ This fear is also reflected in Ilnitsky's accusation that the West is conducting a “mental war,” especially against Russia. Ilnitsky, “The Antichrist as a Technology.”

⁸² “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era,” para. III.

⁸³ “Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress.”

⁸⁴ See, for example, the full text of the Chinese Communist Party's new resolution on history: “Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century,” *Nikkei Asia*, November 19, 2021, accessed June 25, 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Full-text-of-the-Chinese-Communist-Party-s-new-resolution-on-history>.

⁸⁵ See, for example, “Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress” or “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on October 25, 2022,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, October 25, 2022, accessed June 25, 2024, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347389.html.

The external narrative is also well represented in these reports. Although the leitmotif of the Chinese Communist Party's commitment "to the noble cause of peace and development for humanity"⁸⁶ remains, strategic competition has already begun to influence this narrative:

Confronted with drastic changes in the international landscape, especially external attempts to blackmail, contain, blockade, and exert maximum pressure on China, we have put our national interests first, focused on internal political concerns, and maintained firm strategic resolve. We have shown a fighting spirit and a firm determination to never yield to coercive power. Throughout these endeavors, we have safeguarded China's dignity and core interests and kept ourselves well-positioned for pursuing development and ensuring security.⁸⁷

Due to growing tensions, the Party acknowledges the necessity to "be ready to withstand high winds, choppy waters, and ever dangerous storms."⁸⁸ However, unlike Russia, China signals a general willingness to cooperate. With its top-down approach to interpreting reality, exemplified by the above-mentioned resolutions and reports, a high degree of social control over the Chinese society, and strict regulation of the information space, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) maintains firm control over its internal narrative. External actors' perceptions of China, its perspective on reality, and initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative are more diverse. A 2023 Pew Research Center survey shows that people in high-income countries generally view Chinese influence negatively, whereas China enjoys a positive appeal in several middle-income countries, such as Mexico, Argentina, South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, and Indonesia.⁸⁹ The 2021 *Afrobarometer* survey reveals that Chinese influence is viewed more positively in Africa than U.S. influence (63% for China compared to 60% for the United States).⁹⁰ It also indicates that China's vision for future development is appealing in Africa, with 22% viewing China as a good role model and 7% supporting the CCP's idea of following their own country's development path. Nevertheless,

⁸⁶ "Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China," 1.

⁸⁷ "Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China," 3.

⁸⁸ "Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China," 21f.

⁸⁹ Laura Silver, Christine Huang, and Laura Clancy, "China's Approach to Foreign Policy Gets Largely Negative Reviews in 24-Country Survey: Still, Views of China – and Its Soft Power – Are More Positive in Middle-income Countries," *Pew Research Center*, July 27, 2023, accessed October 2, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/07/27/chinas-approach-to-foreign-policy-gets-largely-negative-reviews-in-24-country-survey/>.

⁹⁰ Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Selormey, "AD489: Africans Welcome China's Influence but Maintain Democratic Aspirations," 8.

with 33 % support, the United States remains the most preferred role model in Africa.⁹¹

In Southeast Asia, the CCP's vision for the future of humankind is generally seen in a positive light.⁹² In 2024, if forced to pick sides in strategic competition between China and the United States—the least favorable option for ASEAN countries⁹³—a 50.5 % majority of ASEAN countries's population would choose China. This marks a significant increase from the previous year, when only 38.9 % preferred China.⁹⁴ This shift is noteworthy, as the rise in support coincides with a slight decrease in trust and confidence in China.⁹⁵ Meanwhile, the United States has experienced an even more substantial decline in trust.⁹⁶

Conclusion

The idea of a world defined by struggle and competition has become a new social reality for many. This perception, particularly prevalent in countries like Russia, China, and even the United States, significantly shapes political decision-making and has global consequences.

First, actors who perceive themselves as being in competition try to influence and, to some degree, even manipulate discourses and the underlying narratives in other societies. Therefore, the ongoing competition is not only a struggle between competitors or adversaries; it is also a contest for support and allegiance. Hence, societies worldwide must remain vigilant against the threat of foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) and work to build resilience against it. Institutions such as the European External Action Service⁹⁷ and the U.S. Global Engagement Center provide relevant frameworks to support partner countries in this effort.⁹⁸

Second, as discussed earlier in this article, tackling global challenges like climate change requires global cooperation. A competitive mindset that prioritizes

⁹¹ Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Selormey, "AD489: Africans Welcome China's Influence but Maintain Democratic Aspirations," 3.

⁹² Sharon Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024), 45, www.iseas.edu.sg/centres/asean-studies-centre/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/the-state-of-southeast-asia-2024-survey-report/.

⁹³ 92 % of the population in ASEAN countries oppose taking sides in the U.S.-China competition. Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report*, 47.

⁹⁴ Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report*, 48.

⁹⁵ Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report*, 56.

⁹⁶ Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report*, 64.

⁹⁷ European Union External Action Service, "2nd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats: A Framework for Networked Defence," January 23, 2024, 12ff, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/2nd-eeas-report-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats_en.

⁹⁸ U.S. Department of State, "The Framework to Counter Foreign State Information Manipulation," Fact Sheet, January 18, 2024, accessed June 26, 2024, www.state.gov/the-framework-to-counter-foreign-state-information-manipulation/.

the realization of individual or national interests above all else poses the biggest obstacle to such cooperation.⁹⁹ This mindset also affects interactions with others. In societies and countries that do not share the reality of strategic competition, there is a sense of being instrumentalized rather than treated as equal partners.¹⁰⁰ Focusing too heavily on strategic competition will exacerbate the dilemma of struggling while simultaneously needing to cooperate. Leaders who embrace a competitive mindset must strike a careful balance. As noted above, both the United States and the Chinese Communist Party have incorporated elements of cooperation into their competitive worldview. Unfortunately, the Russian leadership's fear- and threat-based perception of reality leaves little room for concession or compromise. As a result, the current Russian leadership represents the greatest obstacle and threat to collaborative solutions for global challenges.

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⁹⁹ Refer to the deliberations of neuroscientist Thomas Metzinger on the need to develop a "Bewusstseinskultur" ("consciousness culture") in Thomas Metzinger, *Bewusstseinskultur: Spiritualität, intellektuelle Redlichkeit und die planetare Krise* (Berlin/ München: Berlin Verlag, 2023), 11f. For an overview in English see Sascha Benjamin Fink, "Commentary: The Concept of a Bewusstseinskultur," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, Article 732 (July 2018), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00732>.

¹⁰⁰ Katrin Bastian et al., "Perspectives on Strategic Competition," George C. Marshall Center Policy Brief No. 1, November 2024, 3, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/policy-briefs/perspectives-strategic-competition>.



Goodbye Globalization? Hello ‘Fragmentegration’! - The World Economy and Strategic Competition

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Abstract: Tensions in great power competition, geopolitical shifts, and external shocks—such as the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia’s war against Ukraine since February 2014—have put the global economy under stress. International trade, foreign direct investment, and global value chains have been redirected, diversified, and de-risked. Rather than leading to de-globalization, this has resulted in a “fragmentegrated” global economy that is both tripolar, regionally and globally fragmented, and integrated at the same time. The world economy remains deeply interconnected rather than fully decoupled.

This “fragmentegrated” global economy is exposed to great power competition and the increasing weaponization of economic interdependence, affecting all sectors of the multilateral system. Conflict and confrontation dominate under these conditions of “chained globalization.” However, strategic interdependence and the development of counter-coercive instruments can provide mitigation tools for actors facing pressure from great powers.

Keywords: globalization, de-globalization, strategic interdependence, fragmentegration, regional trade agreements, weaponization of interdependence, multilateralism, global governance, strategic power competition.

Introduction

The global economy plays an important role in today’s global power competition. Shifts in geo-economics and geopolitics driven by systemic shocks—such as COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, digitalization, automation, and climate change—have significantly altered the world economy in recent years. Some observers

even bid “goodbye to globalization,”¹ arguing that it has ended as a “dynamic and multidimensional process of economic integration whereby national resources become more and more internationally mobile while national economies become increasingly interdependent.”² They assert that this process has been replaced by the re-nationalization, regionalization, and redirection of former global trade, investment flows, and global value chains.

The network of global interdependencies is indeed shifting, sparking discussions about de-globalization, decoupling, de-risking, or re-globalization of the global economy. Over the past decade, another critical development in the international political economy has gained momentum: the instrumentalization—or even weaponization—of interdependencies by great powers in coercive ways, turning the global economy into a battleground for strategic power competition. What are the implications of these shifts for the world economy?

The world economy is not de-globalizing but rather reshaping its structure. The process of “fragmentegration”³—through practices like re-shoring, near-shoring, and friend-shoring—is creating an overlapping network of regional, inter-regional, multilateral, and global interdependencies, with redirected global value chains (GVCs), trade patterns, and foreign direct investments. Business executives now view supply chain disruptions as the greatest short-term risk, leading to increased interest in transferring operations and services back to home countries (re-shoring), neighboring countries (near-shoring), or friendly and trusted countries (friend-shoring).⁴ These strategies aim to create robust and resilient supply chains that encourage trade and commerce with neighboring and friendly countries.⁵

In addition, digitalization, automation, and climate change are driving structural changes in the global economy. All these aforementioned trends are simul-

¹ Elisabeth Braw, *Goodbye Globalization: The Return of a Divided World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, February 2024).

² Philippe de Lombaerde and P. Lelio Iapadre, “International Integration and Societal Progress: A Critical Review of Globalisation Indicators,” in *Statistics, Knowledge and Policy 2007: Measuring and Fostering the Progress of Societies* (Paris: OECD, 2007).

³ Rem Korteweg, “‘Fragmentegration’: A New Chapter for Globalisation,” *ISPI – Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, November 4, 2022, accessed June 20, 2024, <https://ispionline.it/en/publication/fragmentegration-new-chapter-globalisation-36614>.

⁴ James J. Nedumpara, “Editorial: Friendshoring, Nearshoring, Greenshoring and Reshoring: Changing Faces of Global Supply Chains and Its Impact on International Economic Law – Introduction to the Special Issue,” *Global Trade and Customs Journal* 19, no. 3 (2024): 125-128, <https://doi.org/10.54648/gtcj2024035>; Sanjusha Ladi, “Nearshoring, Friendshoring, Offshoring, Reshoring: Top 4 Global Trade Buzzwords Explained,” *Syren Cloud*, May 12, 2024, <https://syrencloud.com/insights/nearshoring-friendshoring-offshoring-reshoring/>.

⁵ Janet L. Yellen, “Remarks by Secretary of the Treasury Janet L. Yellen on Way Forward for the Global Economy,” *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, April 13, 2022, accessed June 20, 2024, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0714>.

taneously leading to fragmentation and increased integration of the global economy. The global network of interdependencies is being stretched and stressed by these diverging trends. In response, states exhibit both cooperative and confrontational behaviors in this evolving environment, with managing strategic interdependencies now a key component of strategic competition. Geo-economics and geopolitics are thus two sides of the same coin. How is strategic competition shaping the global economy, and what are the implications of these significant shifts for global economic governance?

In the first section of this article, the author analyzes current trends in the global economy toward both fragmentation and integration. The second section examines the growing trend of confrontation and coercion within global interdependencies. The third section then explores the implications of a “fragmente-grated” global economy for the multilateral system.⁶ Finally, the article concludes with recommendations for managing strategic interdependencies in a changing global economy.

Goodbye Globalization? Fragmentation and Integration in the Global Economy

Let us begin with some good news: globalization has not come to an end. The world economy is neither de-globalizing nor fully decoupling. We are not yet seeing the global economy fragment into entirely separate trading blocs. The term “geo-economics” can sometimes be misleading in this regard. Instead, what has emerged in recent years is a global economy that is simultaneously fragmenting and integrating, organized around three major hubs: North America (led by the United States), the European Union (EU) and EFTA, and the Asia-Pacific region (with China and Japan as leading economies). Together, China, the United States, and the European Union represent the three largest economies in the world.

The world’s largest trade blocs today are as follows:⁷

- *Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)* – Valued at \$ 25.84 trillion, this bloc includes 15 nations in the Asia-Pacific, such as China, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and the ASEAN countries. RCEP has been considered as “the most important new multilateral trade deal since the formation of the EU single market.”⁸
- *United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA)* – Formerly known as North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), USMCA is valued at \$ 24.37 trillion and binds the North American economies.

⁶ Korteweg, “Fragmentegration”: A New Chapter for Globalisation.”

⁷ Douglas Broom, “These Are the World’s Biggest Trading Blocs,” *World Economic Forum*, April 28, 2023, accessed June 20, 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/04/growth-summit-2023-world-biggest-trading-blocs/>.

⁸ Broom, “These Are the World’s Biggest Trading Blocs.”

- *Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)* – Launched in 2018 with members including Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, Australia, Singapore, Brunei, New Zealand, Canada, Mexico, Peru, Chile and, since 2023, the United Kingdom. Originally conceived as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) with the United States as a prospective member, the U.S. withdrawal in 2017 changed the composition of what could have been the world’s largest free trade area.
- *European Economic Area (EEA)* – Encompassing all 27 EU members as well as Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein, the EEA is valued at \$ 18.85 trillion. EU countries account for 14 % of global trade, with a combined GDP of \$ 16 trillion, making the European Union the third-largest global economy after China and the United States.
- *African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)* – Launched in 2020, AfCFTA aims to create a continental market among 55 African countries, covering 1.3 billion people. According to the World Bank, AfCFTA has the potential to boost intra-African trade by around 50% and grow Africa’s economy to \$ 29 trillion by 2050.
- *Southern Common Market (Mercosur)* – Established in 1991 with Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela (suspended since 2016 due to human rights issues), Mercosur includes as associate members Suriname, Guyana, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, and Bolivia. The bloc’s combined GDP in 2021 was approximately \$2.2 trillion, making it the world’s fifth-largest economy.

In summary, the world economy is tripolar, regionally aligned, and deeply interconnected on a global scale.

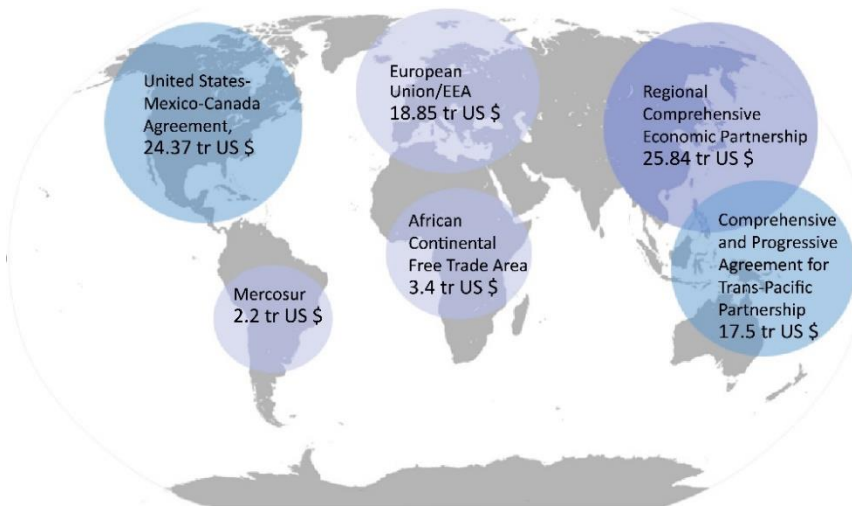


Figure 1: Global Trade Blocs by GDP, 2023.

Source: www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/04/growth-summit-2023-world-biggest-trading-blocs

Two major shocks have profoundly impacted the global economy over the past two decades: the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 and the COVID-19 pandemic. These events have effectively marked the end of the era of hyper-globalization that defined the post-Cold War period—a trend Adjiedj Bakas terms “slowbalization.”⁹ From 1970 to 2008, the share of trade in goods and services as a percentage of GDP rose dramatically, from 13% to 31%. However, this figure has stagnated since 2008 (when the world financial crisis hit the global economy), indicating that global trade has been growing at the same rate as world production.¹⁰ Despite this slowdown, the volume of global trade has increased significantly.¹¹ For example, world trade grew from \$ 318.02 billion in 1970 to \$ 16.14 trillion in 2008. Although the financial crisis caused a drop to \$ 12.55 trillion in 2009, trade rebounded to \$ 19.54 trillion by 2018. COVID-19 briefly interrupted this growth, bringing the trade volume down to \$ 17.64 trillion in 2020, but it has since recovered, reaching \$ 24.9 trillion in 2022. This represents nearly a fourfold increase from \$ 6.45 trillion in 2000, underscoring that the world is far from de-globalizing.

At a press conference during the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2024, WTO General Secretary Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala highlighted a significant transformation and new dynamics in world trade. She noted that trade in services—particularly digital and green trade—has outpaced trade in goods, reflecting a shift in the global economy toward digitalization and green transition.¹² Structural changes in the global economy have been driven as much, if not more, by digitalization and automation as by geopolitical shifts tied to the rise and fall of global economic powers. Among the ten largest companies by market capitalization in 2024, seven are technology companies, one is an automotive company, one is diversified, and one is in oil and gas. By contrast, in 1980, six of the top ten companies were in oil and gas, with only one in technology.¹³

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), a key factor and driver of hyper-globalization, sharply declined following the 2008-2009 global financial crisis. A closer

⁹ Christian Keller and Renate Marold, “Deglobalisation: What You Need to Know,” *World Economic Forum*, January 17, 2023, accessed June 20, 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/deglobalisation-what-you-need-to-know-wef23/>.

¹⁰ Gabriel Felbermayr and Guntram Wolff, “Wohin steuert die Weltwirtschaft?” *Internationale Politik* 78, no. 1 (January/February 2023): 19-25

¹¹ See the data provided by Tugba Sabanoglu, “Trade: Export Value Worldwide 1950-2022,” *STATISTA*, September 29, 2023, accessed March 9, 2024, www.statista.com/statistics/264682/worldwide-export-volume-in-the-trade-since-1950/.

¹² Børge Brende, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, and Thani Ahmed Al Zeyoudi, “Press Conference: Transformation of Global Trade,” *World Economic Forum*, January 18, 2024, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://weforum.org/events/world-economic-forum-annual-meeting-2024/sessions/press-conference-digital-transformation-of-global-trade/>.

¹³ Steve Randall, “Only One of the World’s Biggest Firms of 2000 Is Still in the Top 10 Today: What Were the Biggest Companies in the World by Market Cap in 2000 and 1980?” *Investment News*, September 14, 2023, www.investmentnews.com/equities/only-one-of-the-worlds-biggest-firms-of-2000-is-still-in-the-top-10-today/243474.

look at FDI trends raises concerns about global economic integration, suggesting a potential shift toward policy-driven geo-economic fragmentation. Rising geopolitical tensions and unequal globalization benefits have resulted in huge skepticism toward the multilateral system governing the global economy.¹⁴ Unlike past focus on economic efficiency, today's geo-economic fragmentation increasingly reflects geopolitical priorities:

While trade data do not yet show deglobalization of production chains, policies in many parts of the world now prioritize domestic or geopolitical objectives over efficiency. Strategic industries such as semiconductors or pharmaceuticals, for example, may see a reshoring of supply chains as a result of government policies.¹⁵

Global FDI has declined from 3.1 % of GDP in the early 2000s to 1.3 % between 2018 and 2022.¹⁶ According to the World Investment Report 2023, global FDI flows fell by 12 % to \$ 1.3 trillion in 2022, affected by multiple crises like the war in Ukraine, high food and energy prices, and recession risks.¹⁷ The decline, however, varied by region: FDI inflows to developed economies fell by 37 % (from \$ 597 billion in 2021 to \$ 378 billion in 2022), while developing countries saw a 4 % increase (from \$ 881 billion 2021 to \$ 916 billion in 2022). Europe lost \$ 107 billion in FDI in 2022 (down from \$ 51 billion in 2021), while North America's inflows dropped 26 % to \$ 338 billion from \$ 453 billion. Africa's FDI inflows fell by 44 % to \$ 45 billion compared to \$ 80 billion in 2021, while countries in Latin America and the Caribbean saw inflows double from \$ 138 billion to \$ 208 billion. Asia's FDI remained steady at \$ 662 billion (see Fig. 2).

As FDI flows redirect, regionalization in the global economy is gaining momentum. Both fragmentation and integration are now prominent forces shaping the global economy.

The slowdown of globalization is not new, but the fragmentation of FDI flows along geopolitical fault lines, potentially forming regional blocs, is a new and concerning development for the global economy. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen coined the term "de-risking" to describe the strategy of moving production processes and global value chains to trusted countries with

¹⁴ JaeBin Ahn et al., "Goeconomic Fragmentation and Foreign Direct Investment," Chapter 4 in *World Economic Outlook: A Rocky Recovery* (Washington D.C.: International Monetary Fund, April 2023), 91, <https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/WEO/2023/April/English/ch4.ashx>.

¹⁵ Martina Di Sano, Vanessa Gunnella, and Laura Lebastard, "Deglobalisation: Risk or Reality?" *The European Central Bank (ECB) Blog*, July 12, 2023, accessed June 20, 2024, <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/blog/date/2023/html/ecb.blog230712~085871737a.en.html>.

¹⁶ Ahn et al., "Goeconomic Fragmentation and Foreign Direct Investment," 91.

¹⁷ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *World Investment Report 2023: Investing in Sustainable Energy for All* (New York, NY: United Nations Publications, 2023), <https://unctad.org/publication/world-investment-report-2023>.

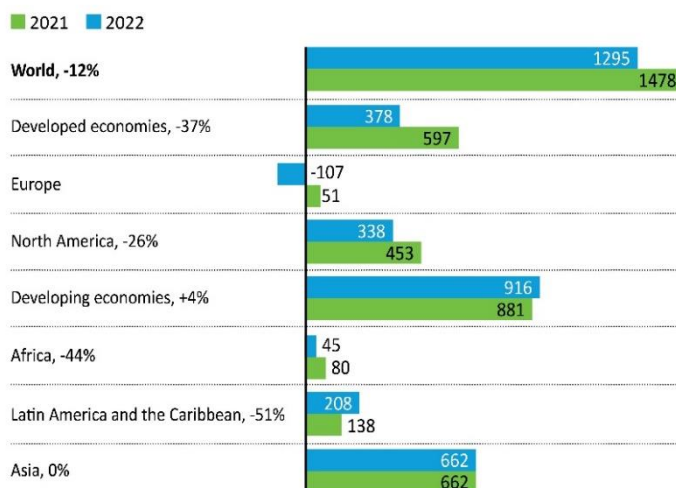


Figure 2: Global FDI by regions, 2021 and 2022.

Source: UNCTAD, FDI/MNE database (<https://unctad.org/fdistatistics>).

aligned political interests.¹⁸ Practices like re-shoring, near-shoring, and friend-shoring aim to reduce the vulnerability of supply chains. Redirecting interdependencies in this way is intended to increase economies’ resilience to geopolitical tensions and external shocks, such as COVID-19.

Geo-economic fragmentation of FDI has emerged as a reaction to both global supply chain disruptions during COVID-19 and potential threats from ongoing geopolitical tensions. Technological advances and automation had already contributed to a slowdown in FDI before the pandemic. More significant than the overall decline in FDI, however, is the regional shift in capital flows observed between 2015 and 2022. The IMF reports that strategic FDI inflows to Asian countries began to decline in 2019, while capital flows into the United States and Europe have shown resilience.

From 2015 to 2020, reallocation—re-, near-, and friend-shoring—trends became evident. The United States attracted less FDI from China (-22.1 %) and Asia (-3.2 %) but saw increases from emerging Europe (27.6 %), advanced Europe (7.5 %), and the Americas (18.6 %). China experienced substantial FDI reductions from Asia (-49.2 %), advanced Europe (-19.7 %), the Americas (-13.3 %), and the United States (-40.6 %), with only emerging Europe increasing its FDI into China (13.9 %). Meanwhile, advanced Europe drew less FDI from China (-17.8 %) and Asia (-11.7 %) but saw gains from emerging Europe (9.9 %), advanced Europe itself (9.3 %), the Americas (14.9 %), and the United States (0.6 %).

¹⁸ Ursula von der Leyen, “Speech by President von der Leyen on EU-China Relations to the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre,” *European Commission*, Brussels, March 30, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/press-corner/detail/en/speech_23_2063.

Re-, near-, and friend-shoring have simultaneously fragmented and integrated the global economy. The current trend of regionalization poses challenges to the multilateral system, increasing its exposure to strategic competition. While the redirection of global value chains, trade, and FDI is reshaping strategic interdependencies within trading blocs, it does not signal full de-globalization; rather, these blocs remain strongly interconnected. This trend is primarily driven by economic considerations within companies rather than exclusively by geopolitical factors.

The Economist Impact Trade in Transition Survey 2023 reveals that the re-configuration of supply chains—through diversification, regionalization, reshoring, and supplier reduction—is mainly motivated by cost reduction (62%), followed by the need to reduce disruption risks (58%), government financial incentives (43%), and local content mandates (35%).¹⁹ Although geo-economics and geopolitics are intertwined, it does not imply that global power competition has entirely overtaken economic logic. Instead, both factors are influencing the global economy concurrently, creating a “fragmentegrated” environment that coexists with strategic competition.

Weaponizing Economic Interdependencies

From an international political economy perspective, the growing interconnectivity and deeper integration of the global economy since the end of the Cold War has been seen as a guarantee for peace and stability. With the expansion of global interdependencies and a denser network of economic transactions, cooperation was considered the dominant pattern in international economic relations.²⁰ Hyper-globalization pushed nations toward even greater collaboration to effectively manage complex interdependencies. The logic of interdependence hinges on reducing vulnerabilities and costly impacts through effective economic and political cooperation, making these interdependencies beneficial to all parties involved. This win-win situation has further encouraged the deepening of economic interdependencies and created a denser network of reciprocal relations.

Conflict and confrontation are counterproductive because they transform the win-win dynamics of mutually beneficial interdependencies into a zero-sum scenario. This shift from cooperation to conflict has occurred gradually over the past decade. Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman argue that the dense network of interdependence has created what they term “chained globalization.”²¹

¹⁹ Economist Impact, *Trade in Transition 2023: Global Report* (Economist Impact, 2023), 21, https://impact.economist.com/projects/trade-in-transition/pdfs/Trade_in_Transition_Global_Report_2023.pdf.

²⁰ Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Power and Interdependence*, 4th ed. (Boston: Longman, 2012).

²¹ Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, “Chained to Globalization: Why It’s Too Late to Decouple,” *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 1 (January/ February 2020): 70-80, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2019-12-10/chained-globalization.

Growing interdependencies have introduced new vulnerabilities, competition, and opportunities for control by state actors, especially global powers. Despite the risks associated with “chained globalization,” countries remain entangled with one another. Interdependence may tempt states to exert economic coercion and engage in espionage to gain advantages while simultaneously attempting to resist similar tactics from rivals.²² The weaponization of economic interdependence thus becomes part of the broader trend of “weaponizing everything,”²³ further intensifying global power competition.

An essential component of the weaponization of economic interdependence is the conflict among great powers over the infrastructure of the global economy. In this “age of coercion,” geopolitics disruptively interferes with the management of complex interdependence. As a result, “all of the infrastructure of globalization risks being weaponized: the financial sector, supply chains, the energy sector and the global trading regime.”²⁴ Despite a shared interest in maintaining a global economic system that benefits all, this system is increasingly weaponized and exploited by key actors to advance individual agendas, thereby undermining its overall functionality. Multilateral regimes, the world trade system, global finance, supply chains, energy, and technology have all become highly contested arenas of global power competition. These systems have been manipulated not only through sanctions but also by influencing decision-making processes across various sectors and implementing coercive economic measures such as heightened customs controls, economic blockades, aid suspensions, travel bans, and the cancellation of international meetings. This phenomenon of economic coercion has become global, extensively employed not only by the United States and the European Union but also by G-20 nations such as Brazil, China, India, Japan, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, and Türkiye.²⁵

Since November 2008, Global Trade Alert has documented a total of 52,624 harmful interventions worldwide that discriminate against foreign commercial interests, along with 1,220 interventions likely to worsen foreign commercial interests, and 10,212 government interventions that benefit foreign commercial interests. Of these measures, 55 % are subsidies, 16.8 % are export-related, 8 % are trade-related investment measures, 7 % are tariffs, 4.7 % are contingent trade-protective measures, and 8.3 % fall under other categories. The United States (9,868), China (6,354), and Brazil (6,754) have introduced the majority of

²² Farrell and Newman, “Chained to Globalization: Why It’s Too Late to Decouple.”

²³ Mark Galeotti, *The Weaponisation of Everything: A Field Guide to the New Way of War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022).

²⁴ Global Agenda Council on Geo-economics, “The Age of Economic Coercion: How Geopolitics is Disrupting Supply Chains, Financial Systems, Energy Markets, Trade and the Internet,” White Paper (Geneva: World Economic Forum, January 2016), 1, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Age_of_Economic_coercion.pdf.

²⁵ Global Agenda Council on Geo-economics, “The Age of Economic Coercion.”

these harmful measures.²⁶ Key targets of these interventions include products such as iron and steel, motor vehicles, trailers and semi-trailers, metal products, cereals, and pharmaceuticals.

As global trade partners increasingly employ harmful measures to discriminate against foreign trade partners and use global value chains to undermine the European Union's economic security, the European Commission launched the European Economic Security Strategy on June 20, 2023. This strategy aims to better equip the European Union and its member states to handle risks to supply chain resilience, the physical and cyber security of critical infrastructure, and the weaponization of economic dependencies or economic coercion.²⁷ In January 2024, the European Union introduced new tools to reinforce its economic security: screening foreign investments, a more coordinated approach to dual-use exports, and assessing potential risks associated with specific EU investments abroad.

This approach is particularly critical in technology and the highly contested area of semiconductors, where recent US controls on specific investments and financial flows into China's technology sector may create extraterritorial obstacles for EU investors. Chinese actions, such as leveraging European companies' know-how while controlling critical technology inputs, could pose even greater risks. The European Union was caught off guard in 2022, when the US administration enacted new laws on controlling exports of advanced semiconductors and related production tools. Given the strategic importance of Dutch companies in this sector—central to global technology competition—the European Union recognized the need for more robust measures.²⁸

The European Union has lacked sufficient legal instruments to deter and counteract coercive actions by third countries. In response, the European Commission adopted three proposals aimed at imposing countermeasures: the Trade Enforcement Regulation (TER), the Anti-Coercion Instrument (ACI), and the Single Market Emergency Instrument (SMEI). Once implemented, these instruments will empower the EU to counteract coercive measures by third parties that exploit the paralysis of the multilateral trading system.²⁹

²⁶ "Global Dynamics," *Global Trade Alert*, accessed June 20, 2024, https://www.globaltradealert.org/global_dynamics/.

²⁷ European Commission, "Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on 'European Economic Security Strategy,'" June 20, 2023, Brussels, JOIN(2023) 20 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52023JC0020>.

²⁸ Tobias Gehrke, "A Maker, Not a Taker: Why Europe Needs an Economic Security Mechanism," Commentary, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, November 9, 2023, accessed June 20, 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/article/a-maker-not-a-taker-why-europe-needs-an-economic-security-mechanism/>.

²⁹ Waldemar Hummer, "'Trade Enforcement Regulation,' 'Anti-Coercion Instrument,' und 'Single Market Emergency Instrument': Reaktionen der Europäischen Union auf handelspolitische Herausforderungen," *Integration* 46, no. 1 (2023): 67-74, <https://doi.org/10.5771/0720-5120-2023-1-67>.

“Fragmentegration” and the Multilateral System

The weaponization of economic interdependencies has escalated open conflict within the multilateral system, resulting in the paralysis of the World Trade Organization’s (WTO) Dispute Settlement Body. This body, which requires seven judges appointed by all WTO members, currently has only one remaining judge. The terms of the others have expired, and the United States has blocked new appointments since December 2019, citing concerns over the body’s judicial power, which it argues could excessively interfere with U.S. economic and trade policy. This deadlock has left all current WTO trade disputes unresolved. Of the 622 cases brought since the body’s establishment in 1995, 177 cases are still pending.

The multilateral trading system is further strained by an increase in regional trade agreements, of which 361 are currently notified to the WTO. As global trade becomes more fragmented, great powers and their trade blocs increasingly exploit the multilateral system, using coercive measures to influence third parties’ trade policies. For instance, the EU is facing heightened pressure to amend its climate, tax, and food safety policies. The Anti-Coercion Instrument now provides the EU with a legal means to impose countermeasures.

Rather than relying on the multilateral dispute settlement mechanism, economic powers are increasingly turning to coercive measures, leading to retaliatory actions and a potential downward spiral in trade openness. With a rise in regional trade agreements and redirections in trade and global value chains, the normative dimension of interdependence gains significance. Friend-shoring prioritizes political alignment over economic efficiency. This approach raises questions: Can only democracies be “friends”? Is the democracy-autocracy distinction sufficient, and how crucial are shared values for friend-shoring?

Moreover, the consensus that open trade is inherently beneficial is eroding, giving way to a more normative approach to trade. The focus has shifted towards how goods and services are produced and delivered. Trade negotiations are now increasingly centered on services and regulatory norms rather than just delivery mechanisms. Today’s trade agreements are often linked to climate objectives, human rights, gender equality, and other political benchmarks. This normative approach is likely to generate friction between those who accept such conditions and those who do not. Critical questions arise in a “fragmentegrated” global economy: How aligned must trading partners be? Will they subscribe to this normative approach in global trade, or will differing values create new divides?³⁰

Towards Strategic Interdependence in a Changing Global Economy

As a result of the “fragmentegrated” global economy, strategic interdependence is increasing.³¹ Actors must navigate multiple interdependencies, developing

³⁰ Korteweg, “Fragmentegration”: A New Chapter for Globalisation.”

³¹ Aslı Aydıntaşbaş et al., “Strategic Interdependence: Europe’s New Approach in a world of Middle Powers,” Policy Brief, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, October 3,

strategies for partnerships, political coexistence, and competition. In this context, de-risking has become more crucial than full decoupling. A strategic interdependence approach enables actors to manage the global economy's simultaneous fragmentation and integration within a tripolar or multipolar framework, both regionally and multilaterally. The growing tensions between the United States and China further complicate the management of these strategic interdependencies, making multilateral "matchmakers"³² essential for collaboration. The European Union, in particular, is well-prepared to work with multilateral matchmakers, as coalition-building in a multilateral context is central to EU policy-making within the Council of the European Union.

The world economy is not de-globalizing; rather, it is shaped by global power competition into a fragmented yet integrated structure driven by interdependence, geo-economics, and geopolitics. This evolving framework makes the global economy more vulnerable to and dependent on great power interference. If a normative approach to global trade were to gain broader consensus among all countries within the multilateral system—a challenging prospect at present—it would need to address another structural issue and carefully consider its implications: the integration of the Global South into the world economy.

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the WTO Director-General, put it the right way:³³ "We need to think of globalization, not the way it was done before, but differently, and we need to make sure that those who did not benefit during the first round, benefit this time."

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2023, accessed June 20, 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/strategic-interdependence-europes-new-approach-in-a-world-of-middle-powers/>.

³² Carla Hobbs, Rafael Loss, Jana Puglierin, and Pawel Zerka, "Multilateral Matchmaker: Exploring Europe's Potential Partners," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, February 2024, accessed June 20, 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/special/multilateral-matchmaker/>.

³³ Simon Lacey, "What's the State of Global Trade? Here's What We Learned in Davos," *World Economic Forum*, January 25, 2024, www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/01/the-state-of-global-trade/.

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While international politics will certainly be shaped by two superpowers, the United States and China, a number of other states and groups of states will influence the outcome of this strategic competition as well. Taking a more complex constellation of players into account reveals new perspectives on political and economic challenges ahead and facilitates the exploration of approaches for bridging the gaps to nonaligned countries. This special issue of *Connections* considers the primary actors in international politics and examines the various world regions that are relevant in strategic competition. The issue also explores cross-cutting trends and topics that influence strategic competition at the global level.

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