

Title: Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations

Coordinators: Rahman Dag e Özgür Tüfekçi

Vol 16, Nº. 2, TD1 – December 2025

<https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525>

ARTICLES

EDITORIAL - Presentation and Framing - Rahman Dag, Özgür Tüfekçi – pp. 3-5

Emerging International System: Emerging Powers and Regional Multipolarity in the case of Turkey-
Rahman Dag – pp. 6-23

Migration as Soft Power in Regional Institutions: The case of South Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) - Akm Ahsan Ullah– pp. 24-47

The Role of Brics in Supporting Emerging Powers at the Global Level: Deeper Institutional Cooperation and Associated Challenges - Christian Ploberger– pp. 48-62

Hydro-Diplomacy as a Strategic Lever: Comparative Insights from India and China in Regional Cooperation and Global Water Governance - Pintu Kumar Mahla – pp. 63-83

Is it Possible to Explain China's Role in Regional Organisations with World System Theory? Shanghai Cooperation Organisation - Ferdi Güçyetmez, Tuğçe Pulurluoğlu – pp. 84-105

Indonesia's Strategic use of Asian in Balancing Regional and Global Power Dynamics - Harsh Mahaseth, Fatima Zainab – pp. 106-126

Türkiye's Counter-Terrorism Strategy in Africa: A Regional Institutionalised Governance of Foreign Policy in the Light of Global Power Competitions – Touazi Ilas – pp. 127-148

Soft Anarchy: Balancing Sovereignty, Regionalism, and Globalization - Mehmet Recai Uygur, Yusuf Zakir Baskin, Fatih Tekin – pp. 149-168

Institutional Balancing as Diplomacy: Türkiye's Dual-Track Engagement in a Multipolar Order - Sami Kiraz, Nail Elhan – pp. 169-186

From West to The Rest: Analysing Turkey's Brics Membership Bid through the Prism of Westernism - Seven Erdoğan, Burçin Bedel – pp. 187-204

Emerging Powers' Strategy for Power Projection: Nigeria's Peacekeeping through Regional & International Organizations - Yunus Öztürk – pp. 205-229

Türkiye's Role in Shaping Regional Politics in the Middle East through the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Astana Process - Yusuf Dinçel – pp. 230-247

Complementary or Contradictory? Türkiye's Emerging Middle Power Interactions with the United Nations and the European Union - Gonca Oğuz Gök, Nevra Esentürk – pp. 248-271

India's Transition from Rule-Taker to Rule-Maker: Aspirations and Challenges - Amit Upadhyay, Abhinav Mehrotra – pp. 272-285

Dancing With Giants: Indonesia and its Inclusive Approach in the Indo-Pacific after Brics Acceptance - Mansur Juned, Mohamad Hery Saripudin – pp. 286-301

Overlapping Organisations and Emerging Powers: India's Selective Engagement through the Lens of Forum Shopping - Fatma Sever, Mehmet Recai Uygur – pp. 302-319



Brics Policies towards the United Nations, World Trade Organisation and European Union - Zekeri Momoh – pp. 320-341

The Arctic Council and the Russian Sphere of Influence: Deconstructing the Russian Soft Power and Economic Ambitions in the Arctic - Shashi Bhusan Kr Vishwakarma – pp. 342-357

The Emerging Power Paradigm in South Africa's Relations with International Organisations - Hakan Aydın – pp. 358-374

Civilizational States in a Changing Global Order: India's Emerging Role in Brics - Sreshtha Chakraborty – pp. 375-388

The Organisation of Turkic States: An Emerging Actor in the Context of Geopolitical Opportunities and Limitations? - Yusuf Ziya Bölükbaşı, İlhan Bilici, Gökberk Yücel – pp. 389-410

The Role of Leadership Discourses in the Ontological Construction of the Organisation of Turkic States as a Regional Power - Kürşad Güç – pp. 411-433

Balancing an Emerging Power's Influence: Cambodia's Foreign Policy Choices within Asean under Chinese Economic Leverage - Yelizaveta Yurchenko, Özgür Tüfekçi – pp. 434-451

From Merit to Might: Rethinking EU Enlargement in Light of Türkiye and Ukraine - Sylvia Tiriyaki – pp. 452-468

The Conceptualisation of Islamic Unity in the Age of Nation-States: The Muslim World, the Caliphate, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation - Erdal Kurğan – pp. 469-491

EDITORIAL

RAHMAN DAG

rahman.dag@gmail.com

He got his master's degree from the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) and was then awarded with Philosophy of Doctorate degree from Exeter University, Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, in the field of Middle East Politics. Additionally, he is a founding member of CESRAN International (www.cesran.org) and serves as the Deputy Director of the organisation. He is currently working at the Middle East Institute, Marmara University (Turkey) and is the head of the Political Economy of the Middle East department in the Institution. His latest interest is in great power politics and the accommodation of rising or regional powers into the world politics and international system. He recently published two edited books on "great power politics in greater Eurasia" and "trends and transformation in world politics". His current research interests focus on changes in international systems and their international and regional implications.

ÖZGÜR TÜFEKÇİ

ozgurtufekci@ktu.edu.tr

Ozgur Tufekci is an Associate Professor of International Relations at Karadeniz Technical University (Turkey). He is also the founder and Director-General of CESRAN International, a UK-based think-tank (www.cesran.org), ranked among the world's "Best Independent Think Tanks". He holds an MA in International Studies from the University of Sheffield, UK and a PhD in Sociology and International Relations from Coventry University, UK. His primary research interests are [Turkish] Eurasianism, Nation-Building, Theories of Nationalism, Geopolitical Studies, Rising Powers and Regionalism. Currently, he is teaching at undergraduate, graduate and doctoral levels, focusing on methodological foundations of regionalism, rising powers and nationalism. He is the Editor-in-Chief of The Rest: Journal of Politics and Development (www.therestjournal.com) and Novus Orbis: Journal of Politics and International Relations (<https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/novusorbis>).

How to cite this article

Dag, Rahman & Tüfekçi, Özgür (2025). Editorial - Presentation And Framing. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 3-5. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525ED>





PRESENTATION AND FRAMING

RAHMAN DAG

ÖZGÜR TÜFEKÇİ

Most of the states in the world are members of global institutions, and this has been considered as proof for being accepted as an equal member of international politics and society. This is mostly framed for membership in the United Nations. Every UN member has a vote in the assembly, but in practical and binding decisions are made in the UN Security Council, consisting of five permanent and 10 non-permanent members. Since the UN Security Council has not been able to solve the conflicts in the world, it is criticised as being a platform for great power competition according to their national interest rather than being a source of implementation of international law and justice in the world. Given that this criticism started in the late Cold War era, several states initiated alternate platforms including bilateral agreements, taking actions by themselves if they can and also leading regional organizations to work out as a block to get their voice heard.

Some of them, currently conceptualised as emerging powers, rising powers or middle powers in the literature, have established their own regional institutions. Since the mid-Cold War years, there has been a tendency to form regional organisations in the name of regional economic development and particular identities (primarily regional). It is evident that most emerging powers or a block of states, seeking to provide an alternative way of politics against the Western hegemony or get sick of being stuck between great/super powers, engage with regional organisations. They either form a regional organisation or become a member of regional organisations. The problematic of this special issue is that, suppose membership in a global institution is adequate for states to secure their national interests, especially economic and political interests, in cooperation with a global organization that most of the states are members of. Why are there alternative regional institutions? Of course, there might be different answers to that question. Some believe that the regionalisation of international institutions does not contradict the global ones but actually complete and coordinate each other for specific cases, as global institutions can not cover every single issue which might have a regional origin. However, it is evident, once they look at their charters, that regional dimensions are at the core. Therefore, it can be considered as evidence for the argument that global institutions serve the global powers and do not take national interests or the security of middle or small powers into account. Either way, the proliferation of regional institutions is legitimised and logically acceptable in international world politics. As Panetta (2015: 81) suggests, “the creation of integrated regional areas seems to be the “postmodern passport to globalization”, especially from a politico-economic perspective.



In current world politics, security is not just military protection but has been extended to numerous aspects, and there is no way that one or a set of states can provide such security. Therefore, regional integration, economic development, and political and military alliances have played a significant role in the state's foreign policies. Even though these initiatives cannot be considered as regional institutions that would end up as an alternative international system, they can be regarded as a current one. The current international system is a "not yet fully established multi-polarity" as there is no consensus on which states constitute a polarity or how many polarities we have in world politics. It means that almost every single state in current world politics instrumentalises international institutions to protect their national interest and security via bi-lateral agreements, regional organisations and international (global) institutions at the same time. While doing that, they place regional institutions at the centre, do not withdraw from the global institutions, and restrain themselves from signing bilateral agreements for specific issues.

Under these circumstances, this special issue intends to cover emerging powers' policies towards international (global) and regional organisations. Do emerging powers use regional organizations as leverage against the global order or institutions? Are they used as a collaborator between international and regional politics as a sort of check and balance? Or is this an indication of regionalisation of world politics, and thus, emerging powers seek to establish their own sphere of influence? Relying on these questions, this special issue intends to cover emerging powers' efforts to be part of a regional organisation while not withdrawing from the global ones. There might be an issue of definition for what an emerging power is, but most of the literature agrees on an adequate number of candidates, such as India, Russia, Brazil, Turkey, South Africa, Indonesia, Iran, and possible emerging powers can be given space in this special issue.

Receiving 90 submissions to the special issue indicates that there are quite number of academics this dilemma between international (global) and regional institutions. Just 25 of them successfully completed the review process and got accepted to have a place in this special issue. Almost all of the papers in this special issue touch upon an aspect of regional organisations questioning their purpose, influence of their presence in world politics. Several of them focus on a single regional organisation as what they stand for. As editors, we have realised that specific regional organisations have an effect of igniting more collaborations or a conflictual nature against others. That is another aspect that needs to be addressed with another pile of work but it is better just to raise the question of how regionalisation of world politics via regional organizations shares the emerging international system. It is for sure that there is no currently an embedded international system as in the Cold War and how do current world politics accommodate this tendency.

We would like to thank all contributors in this special issue and the Journal administration for letting us work on such a significant issue and provide an opportunity to reach out.

EMERGING INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM: EMERGING POWERS AND REGIONAL MULTIPOLARITY IN THE CASE OF TURKEY

RAHMAN DAG

rahman.dag@marmara.edu.tr

Middle East Institute, Marmara University (Turkey). <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4198-2851>

Abstract

This study proposes a new approach to understanding the post-Cold War world order by examining the changing structure of the international system through the conceptual framework of regional multipolarity. Drawing on systemic theories in international relations and the concept of multi-level institutional multipolarity, the article argues that emerging powers increasingly pursue their national interests through regional rather than global institutions. The analysis, taking Turkey as an example, shows that emerging powers are expanding their political, economic, and cultural influence by instrumentalising regional organisations while maintaining their relations with global institutions. The analysis defines four fundamental principles of regional multipolarity. Firstly, regional organisations encompass not only economic but also political, security, and cultural dimensions. Secondly, emerging powers strengthen their regional autonomy while maintaining their global membership. Thirdly, they establish and lead regional structures independently of superpowers, and lastly, they engage in strategic interaction within multiple regional blocs. The study argues that increasing regional organisations, spearheaded by emerging powers, signals that the global order is evolving into a multipolar international system based on regional organisations, defined as “regional multipolarity”.

Keywords

International Systems, Emerging Powers, Regional Multipolarity, Turkey.

Resumo

Este estudo propõe uma nova abordagem para compreender a ordem mundial pós-Guerra Fria, examinando a estrutura em mudança do sistema internacional através do quadro conceptual da multipolaridade regional. Baseando-se em teorias sistémicas das relações internacionais e no conceito de multipolaridade institucional multinível, o artigo argumenta que as potências emergentes procuram cada vez mais os seus interesses nacionais através de instituições regionais, em vez de globais. A análise, tomando a Turquia como exemplo, mostra que as potências emergentes estão a expandir a sua influência política, económica e cultural, instrumentalizando as organizações regionais, mantendo as suas relações com as instituições globais. A análise define quatro princípios fundamentais da multipolaridade regional. Em primeiro lugar, as organizações regionais abrangem não só a dimensão económica, mas também a política, a segurança e a cultural. Em segundo lugar, as potências emergentes reforçam a sua autonomia regional, mantendo a sua adesão global. Em terceiro lugar, estabelecem e lideram estruturas regionais independentemente das superpotências e, por último, envolvem-se em interações estratégicas dentro de múltiplos blocos regionais. O



estudo argumenta que o aumento das organizações regionais, lideradas por potências emergentes, sugere que a ordem global está a evoluir para um sistema internacional multipolar baseado em organizações regionais, definido como “multipolaridade regional”.

Palavras-chave

Sistemas Internacionais, Potências Emergentes, Multipolaridade Regional, Turquia.

How to cite this article

Dag, Rahman (2025). Emerging International System: Emerging Powers and Regional Multipolarity in the Case of Turkey. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 6-23. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.1>

Article submitted on 15th May 2025 and accepted for publication on 14th September 2025.





EMERGING INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM: EMERGING POWERS AND REGIONAL MULTIPOLARITY IN THE CASE OF TURKEY

RAHMAN DAG

Introduction

The systemic approach to international relations is a sort of macro approach to the discipline. It requires making general assessments of power politics and determining the particular way foreign policy preferences of all states are shaped, mainly by the level of power. If there is a pattern, verbally or practically confirmed by all states, especially by dominant(s) or hegemon(s) or superpower states, then it is possible to make a judgment that there is an international system in operation. Historical perspective reveals that several eras have been dominated by certain states or empires claiming control over world politics (Degterev 2019).

Despite the logistical difficulties, the entire world's terrain was explored, and political control over these lands became a battlefield or conflict zone among powerful political entities. This process evolved together with the colonisation of the lands by the European great powers. The power disparity between Europe and the rest of the world led to world politics being discussed in European palaces and parliaments. In nature, the concert of Europe was a regional orientation of world politics, but it covered every inch of the world. Given that the colonising process was still underway worldwide and the power politics in Eastern Europe, a major war among great powers was quite possible. As stated by Richard Elrod, "Certain constraining and moderating forces operated that compelled or induced sovereign states to refrain from adventurous and aggressive foreign policies and from 1815 to 1854, European interstate relations clearly conformed to that pattern. No wars occurred between the great powers; a large measure of security and stability characterised the international system" (1976, p. 159). Once an international system is formed based on the balance of power among embedded great powers, it maintains that there are formal or informal rules that great powers abide by, and dependent small states or colonies are kept in line with these rules. For the first multipolar international system, in which more than two nations had power roughly equal to each other, a conference system was established that all great powers agreed to use to resolve issues. It meant that great powers first communicated with each other and decided together whether there was a conflictual disagreement, so that such an issue did not escalate into a war (Schenk 1947). Especially experiencing Napoleon's Wars in the European continent, "Statesmen who had finally recognised the necessity of cooperation in the last coalition against Napoleon continued to believe in the advantages of collaboration to maintain the postwar settlement" (Elrod 1976, p.162).



The core reason behind such an international system could be that none of the great powers would want to go to war with another great power, which might alter the existing balance of power in favour of the victorious one. In this sense, a war could trigger a chain reaction, altering the balance of power and potentially encouraging one of the great powers to subsume all others one by one if they felt powerful enough and desired to do so. That was the lesson taken from the Napoleonic Wars and paved the way for prioritising a diplomatic solution before, or during, a conflict to halt it. Preventing a major war or maintaining the peace in a certain way of doing international politics has been a driving force behind the international system. It is because systemic thoughts can restrain all great or lesser powers from going to war before trying to prevent it. To achieve this, either to avoid a possible war through coordination or to go to war by forming an alliance, international institutions or regimes have played a crucial role. In other words, "...all efforts at international cooperation take place within an institutional context of some kind, which may or may not facilitate cooperative endeavours. To better understand cooperation and discord, we need to investigate the sources and nature of international institutions, as well as how institutional change occurs (Keohane 1988, p. 380). While it may sound strange to trace systemic changes through institutions, new and successive systems designed in line with the balance of power can often be read in terms of institutions led by leading states.

Emergence and Formation of International Systems

Since the establishment of the Concert of Europe, several shifts in the balance of power have led to variations in the international system. Current diplomacy has been shaped by these experiences and evolved into the formation of permanent international institutions, rather than occasional diplomatic conferences. In this line, the literature on the systemic approach and international systems surfaced. Cumulative literature on the international system or world order has been classified into three main international systems (Multipolarity, Bi-polarity and Uni-polarity) relying on historical experiences in world politics (Chiot and Hall 1982; Shannon 2018; Buzan and Little 2000). In the literature, it is widely acknowledged that the First and Second World Wars are the primary reasons for systemic change, resulting from dramatic shifts in the balance of power. While the time period between the two world wars is generally considered to be a multipolar era, the post-Second World War period until the dissolution of the Soviet Socialist Republics in 1990 is regarded as a bipolar era. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Republics, a brief period from the 1990s to the early 21st century is viewed as a unipolar era led by American supremacy, but it never represented a well-established systemic aspect (Koslowski and Kratochwil 1994). Since then, systemic analysis of multipolarity has become prevalent in the IR literature, seeking an explanation of the new international system or world order (Buzan and Little 1994; Knorr and Verba 2019).

In parallel with the history of international systems, the Concert of Europe, a practice of international conferences among great powers, created an international regime intended to maintain the balance of power. The continuous multipolarity led by Great Britain in the post-World War I period was associated with the League of Nations. Once a new balance of power emerged in the post-WWII period, the United Nations (UN) took the lead among



nations, under the prominent figures of the US and the Soviets (Balci, 2023), characterised by bipolarity. The Soviet Union was dissolved, and therefore, there were no longer two superpowers; the US took the lead as the hegemonic power until its power status was shaken by subsequent military, political, and economic crises. There was no newly established international institution symbolising the US hegemony or any other emerging great power, and that is why a decade-long unipolarity could not survive or evolve into a well-embedded international system. Since the early years of the 21st century, it may be more accurate to include the so-called unipolarity period between 1990 and 2001. During this time, well-established international institutions have been losing influence, while regional institutions led by emerging powers have been gaining space in world politics. Whether international (global) or regional, the institutions' functions are significant in order to "benefit from transaction costs" and "to facilitate the negotiation, monitoring, and enforcement" (Keohane 1988, p. 387; Martin 1992, p. 789), allowing states to maintain their national interests. In this sense, the loss of influence and effectiveness of international (global) institutions, as well as the increasing effectiveness of regional institutions, has been a significant part of international system studies (Neuvonen, 2019, p. 230).

This study intersects with the literature on global governance and its ongoing debates, arguing that rising global powers pursue their interests through regional institutionalisation rather than through their own institutions (Tüfekçi and Dag 2022). This paper is an initial part of a larger academic effort to explain the emerging international system. As claimed by Barry Buzan, right after the end of bipolarity, "a multipolar centre will be more complex and more fluid, and may well allow for the development of militarily hesitant great powers (Buzan 1991, p. 435). Many studies argue that an emerging international system and even a form of multipolarity are developing. However, as current world politics do not fully align with this multipolarity, the international relations literature seeks to determine the type of multipolarity we are currently experiencing. Some started to seek to grasp a new kind of multipolarity in 2001 when 9/11 occurred, since it was the first time the USA was hit in its own land after WWII. Others began to think about a new version of multipolarity right after the 2008 economic crisis, which had a significant global impact. However, the core point leading to the search for understanding the new international system seems to be the dissolution of the USSR, as Buzan perfectly substitutes his argument as follows;

"At the same time, the shift from two superpowers to several great powers should mean both a reduction in the intensity of global political concerns and a reduction in the resources available for sustained intervention. This, in turn, points to the rise of regional politics. Because the great powers are spread across several regions and do not include a dominating ideological or power rivalry within their ranks, they will project their own conflicts into the periphery much less forcefully and systematically than under the zero-sum regime of the Cold War. Because regions are less constrained by the impact of their conflicts on the global scorecard of two rival superpowers, local rivalries and antagonisms will probably have more autonomy. Local great powers such as India, China, and perhaps Brazil should also find their regional influence increased" (Buzan 1991, p. 435).



Additionally, universal membership based on multilateralism, such as the UN, IMF, WHO and WB, were discussed through the prism of realism and neoliberalism due to the great powers' instinctive desire to follow national interests and "the apparent inefficiencies of such a cumbersome system of rule creation and governance", respectively (Kahler 1992, p. 682). Kahler, even from an economic perspective, suggested that "both minilateral great power" collaboration within multilateral institutions (to reduce the barriers to cooperation raised by large numbers) and bilateral and regional derogations from multilateralism (as the great powers exerted their bargaining power). Given that economic regionalism had already begun by the last decade of the Cold War (Taylor 1993; Hurrell 1995), IR academics had just experienced the dissolution of the Soviets, and the number of great powers in the early 1990s was relatively low, his insightful criticism of universal-level multilateralism or international (global) institutions is quite significant. Current emerging powers may not become fully-fledged great powers, but the establishment of regional organizations¹ that they lead might indicate a path towards what Kahler called "regional derogations from multilateralism".

In this regard, Dag (2026) proposes a new concept of "multi-level institutional multipolarity," arguing that all international systems have their own specific institutions to substantiate certain relations among states. That might be, from a realist perspective, formed according to a hierarchy, based on military, economic, political, and normative capabilities (Acharya 2005) —that is, power. His main argument is that the power disparity between middle (emerging) powers that have levelled up from being lesser powers and great powers that have levelled down from being superpowers has been closing, leading to an increase in the number of regional institutions focusing on specific issues. In this perspective, he suggests emerging great powers do not see international (global) institutions as a platform where they can protect their national interests best, and so they prefer to work with neighbouring states to solve the issues within a regional circle by establishing multilateral and bilateral agreements, which is systematically called "multi-level institutional multipolarity" (Dag 2026). This paper can be considered a case study of his theoretical contribution to international systems studies.

In the currently growing multipolarity discussions, emerging powers play a vital role. Distinct from bipolarity and unipolarity, they are not entirely dependent on superpowers. In other words, they do not just bandwagon superpowers in international politics, especially in regional conflicts that have great influence (Balci 2019). They have gradually realised that their best interests may differ slightly or significantly from those of others. In these cases, how they act determines their emerging power status. The initial point of this conditionality can be found in the Balkan Wars, in which European states expected the US to intervene and resolve the conflict, but the US initially showed little inclination to do so. In this, European great powers' perceptions of possible dissemination of conflict in Europe were not received by the US at the same level and as a threat to its national interest, especially in terms of economic, political, and military costs. This case may mark

¹ Before a regional organization is established, some argue that a regional community or identity commonality at regional level is required. It is a valid and common argument in the IR literature but the context of the paper refrain to delve into this discussion as it requires much more space than a paper. For more details, please see, (Clark 1966; Neuvonen 2019). Additionally, it might not be possible to have a commonly accepted definition of what regional organization is and what makes them different from international (global) organization. Piero Pennetta provides a comprehensive elaboration on these questions (Pennetta 2015).



the initial shift in status and power of emerging powers, and subsequently, international politics will witness more examples from the early 1990s to the present. The list can be extended with others but no space for extensive analysis in this paper, such as Russia's resentments on NATO's enlargement policy toward eastern Europe, Latin American states' eagerness for economic and political independence from the US, South Asian states' efforts to look for alternative regional economic structure, individually opposing states against "global war on terror", regional great powers' involvement on regional issues as they want to be more effective role in their imminent regionality and also international politics, the most recently diplomatic frustration against Israel's genocide in Gaza (Dag 2025) and so on.

In general, the more economic, political and military power they get, the more emerging powers go away from the footsteps of superpower(s) (alternatively dominant or hegemonic powers). Instead, they seek to draw a new path that they see as more appropriate to their national interests. Taking their own national interests at the core, emerging powers have been seeking platforms where they can apply or at least have their voice and preferences heard. Unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral agreements are possible options for individuals to participate in an issue that interests them. What is meant by "multi-level institutional multipolarity" actually corresponds with all these ways, and emerging powers have been employing and trying to institutionalise them. In this paper, not multi-level agreements but regional institutions, as a multilateral action, will be considered as a case study of a new conceptualisation, the "regional multipolarity".

Instrumentalising regional organisations by emerging (regional) powers

The concept of regionalisation as a subsystem is not a new idea. It has been discussed in the literature since the late 1990s to analyse new economic regional organisations following the end of bipolarity (Thompson 1973; Buzan and Wæver 2003; Katzenstein 2005; Goertz and Powers 2014; Özdemir 2015; Levaggi 2019). What makes it different from the previous conceptualisation is that this is not just about economic integration at the regional level but can be extended to every realm of international politics (Stewart-Ingersoll and Frazier 2012, p. 4-6). As another distinctive feature of this conceptualisation endeavour, in its regionalisation of world politics, each emerging power attempts to become a leading power in a regional organisation while also maintaining relations with other regional organisations. This feature is not just valid for the leading state but also for the rest of the regional Organisation. In other words, all leading states in regional organisations and member states continue to be full members of international (global) organisations. Their commitments to them might be getting loose, but emerging powers do not cut their full membership status in these international (global) organisations. In general, emerging powers that become leading powers in a regional organisation instrumentalise regional and international organisations to protect their national interests. In this way, international (global) organisations will lose their effectiveness in international politics. However, they will still address the needs of emerging powers to raise their voice against dominant or hegemonic powers.

Thirdly, theoretically, in the regional multipolar system as a new international system, there is no direct involvement of previous superpowers. Even currently hegemonic or



great powers seek to extend their sphere of influence through regional organisations, as they have been acting as leading powers within them. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization led by China, US' membership in the Latin American regional organizations and Russia's initiative to form regional organizations with newly independent states from the Soviet Union, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS, in 1991), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO, in 2002) and Eurasian Economic Community in 2015 (Tüfekçi and Aksu 2024). The fourth and final principle in regional multipolarity concerns the interaction between emerging powers and other regional organisations led by emerging powers. This type of interaction keeps emerging powers connected and cooperating when the issue requires more international support.

To prove the applicability of this new conceptualisation, regional multipolarity and regional organisations led by emerging powers should be individually considered, at least some of which have been mostly regarded as emerging powers, such as Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey (Godehardt and Nabers 2011). There is no space to cover all of them and explore the regional organisations they initiated, as well as how to act in regional and international (global) organisations. In this paper, this new conceptualisation will be verified in the case of Turkey, which, as the case study of this paper, has been mainly evaluated as a middle power or regional power. Since it does not fully follow the footsteps of the foreign policies of super or great powers in regional and global issues, it might be because there are no more superpowers in world politics that other states could entirely depend on, or most of the states are no longer lesser powers and want to prioritise their own national interests (Garzón Pereira 2014). In either of these, Turkey has pursued an active foreign policy since the early 21st century, becoming involved in regional and global issues through bilateral relations, the establishment of regional organisations, and engagement with other regional organisations.

The Case of Turkey

The emerging powers, along with membership in international (global) organisations, take the initiative to form a regional organisation with which they share similar interests on a specific issue. Thanks to that, they can interact with various international and regional actors and issues. To solidify the main argument of the paper, it is beneficial to examine the organisations with which Turkey is affiliated, including full member, observer, participant, and founding member status. It can be generalised for all emerging powers, specifically for Turkey, when the power balance and political strains of the Cold War disappeared from world politics. Most emerging powers then found a political vacuum in which they could make manoeuvres. It meant they no longer needed a security guarantee from one superpower against another. In this case, most of them focused on their economic, political, and military development by enriching their interactions with others. To do that, they have been addressing the issues that they could not raise under bipolar world politics. This paper seeks to demonstrate these initiatives by forming regional organisations for better communication, reducing transaction costs, addressing previously untouched foreign issues, and fostering ideational/normative commonality through regulations and transformations (Acharya 2005, p. 97), without the direct involvement of previously superpowers.



It is pretty difficult to instantly break all inherited embedded relations with the super or great powers, but in an enduring process, gradual independence from those inherited economic, military, and political relations seems to make it possible for emerging powers in an alternative platform (regional organisations) cooperating with adjacent neighbour states. "Such regional (emerging) powers possess the opportunity to pursue their own national interests in an effective manner with neighbouring states, due to their advantage in relative power" (Stewart-Ingersoll and Frazier 2012, p. 6). Here is a chronologically listed list of international (global) and regional organisations with which Turkey has been affiliated. The status of membership in these organisations is quite indicative of emerging powers, in this case, Turkey, in terms of taking the initiative to address regional issues or regional interactions. The list is compiled from the website of the Foreign Ministry of Turkey, which provides detailed information on the context of the organisations and Turkey's status within them (International Organisations / Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Several multilateral agreements might also be included in the list, but the list provided on the official website is limited to those that adequately offer a number of regional and international organisations to examine the main argument of the paper.

Providing brief information on the various statuses would be more explanatory in terms of Turkey's positions in the regional organisations listed above. Founding member status mostly means being among the states that drive the main doctrine behind the establishment of a regional organisation. It also means a full membership status, but leading one in terms of normative, military or economic dynamics (Destradi 2008, p. 21). In this context, it refers to full rights and obligations under the Organisation's founding treaty or charter. This status grants the state the authority to participate in the Organisation's decision-making processes, to vote, to be represented, and to be subject to the Organisation's obligations. Full members have the power to shape the Organisation's agenda, but they are also subject to normative pressures within the Organisation (Abbott and Snidal, 1998).

On the other hand, associate membership allows states or regions to participate in the Organisation's activities to a limited extent; they typically do not have voting rights but may attend meetings as observers. In this type of membership, Turkey may not have the full right to vote or participate in the decision-making process. Still, this status certainly makes Turkey involved in regional and international issues within the context of that regional Organisation.

Observer Status is a form of membership that grants states or international organisations the right to attend the Organisation's meetings and obtain information, but does not grant them the right to participate in the decision-making processes. This status strikes a balance between political recognition and avoiding legal obligations (Kerwin, 1981). In international relations, observer status typically indicates that a country seeks to develop closer ties with the Organisation or supports its principles, and is often considered a preliminary step towards full membership (Claude 1966). Partnership or dialogue status enables states to collaborate with an international or regional organisation at a thematic level. Such relationships are typically conducted in specific areas such as security, economy, environment, or technology. Unlike membership, this status offers flexibility and voluntary participation to the parties involved. For example, NATO's Partnership for



Peace program or ASEAN's Dialogue Partner mechanism enable strategic cooperation without the obligations of full membership (Schimmelfennig 2003).

Regarding the first principle of "regional multipolarity", since the end of the bipolarity (Cold War), given the regional organisations' characteristics in Table 2, they do not solemnly depend on economic development, but continental, geographic, and ethnic commonality played a crucial role in the core idea of establishing a regional organisation. As an emerging power, Turkey has led the establishment of diplomatic relations to create the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), aiming to define the borders of exclusive economic zones in the Black Sea, which has both geographic and economic origins (Bayram and Tüfekçi 2018). It formed TÜRKSOY to enhance economic, political, and cultural cooperation among Turkic states, which subsequently led to the establishment of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS). This sort of de-centralization of Western orientation has also attracted the attention of academics in the case of Turkey (Öniş 2010; Kutlay and Öniş 2021).

In terms of the second principle of regional multipolarity, these tables, especially the first one, clearly indicate that Turkey, as one of the emerging powers, does not cut its relations or halt its membership status in international (global) organisations while seeking to establish a regional organisation that Turkey leads and encourages. In this regard, there are no international (global) organisations that Turkey has withdrawn from. Even with a prolonged relationship with the EU, which is literally a regional organisation despite its global influence, Turkey has not ceased its applications to the EU (Öniş 2010). On the contrary, if not a founding member, Turkey has gradually become a full member of international organisations after the Second World War. The first feature of the newly conceptualised international system, in Regional Multipolarity, is that emerging powers, in this case, Turkey, do not substitute regional organisations with international ones. Even if they believe that international (global) organisations do not serve their best national interests, it is essential to remain part of the international community by maintaining full membership (Dag 2026).

Table 1. The Organisations of which Turkey is a Full Member

Organisation (Full Name)	Start Date	Turkey's Membership Status	Full Members	Leading State	Notes
United Nations (UN)	1945	Full Member	193 states	United States	Universal organization
International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank - IBRD)	1947	Full Member	189 states	United States	Global development
International Monetary Fund (IMF)	1947	Full Member	190 states	United States	Financial cooperation
Council of Europe (CoE)	1949	Full Member	46 states	France / Germany	Human rights
North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)	1952	Full Member	32 states	United States	Military alliance
International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)	1957	Full Member	178 states	United States	Nuclear energy oversight



Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA)	1957	Full Member	34 states	United States	Nuclear safety & policy
World Food Programme (WFP)	1961	Full Member	120+ states	United States	UN food assistance
Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)	1961	Full Member	38 states	United States	Developed economies
Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)	1969	Full Member	57 states	Saudi Arabia	Islamic countries
Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)	1975	Full Member	57 states	United States / Russia	Security cooperation
International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)	1977	Full Member	177 states	Italy	UN agricultural agency
International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) / CGIAR	1977	Full Member	Global	United States	Agricultural research
Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO)	1985	Full Member	10 states	Iran	Central Asia & Middle East
Australia Group	1985	Full Member	43 states	Australia	Chemical and biological export controls
Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR)	1987	Full Member	35 states	United States	Missile export controls
European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)	1991	Full Member	73 states	United Kingdom / France	Development finance
Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC)	1992	Full Member	13 states	Turkey	Black Sea region
World Customs Organisation (WCO)	1992	Full Member	184 members	Belgium	Customs cooperation
International Organisation of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSOY)	1993	Full Member	14 states	Turkey	Turkic cultural cooperation
Wassenaar Arrangement	1994	Full Member	42 states	United States	Arms export controls
World Trade Organisation (WTO)	1995	Full Member	164 states	United States / European Union	Trade organization
Developing Eight Organisations for Econ. Cooperation (D-8)	1997	Full Member	8 states	Turkey	Muslim eco. cooperation
Group of Twenty (G-20)	1999	Full Member	20 members	United States	Major economies
Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR)	2001	Full Member	6 states	Turkey	Black Sea naval
Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA)	2002	Full Member	28 states	Kazakhstan	Asian security dialogue
Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD)	2002	Full Member	35 states	Thailand (coordinator)	Asia-wide cooperation



Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)	2008	Full Member	43 states	European Union	Euro-Mediterr. region
Organisation of Turkic States (OTS)	2009	Full Member	6 states	Turkey	Turkic world
International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA)	2009	Full Member	169 states	United Arab Emirates	Renewable energy
The Standards and Metrology Institute for Islamic Countries (SMIIC)	2010	Full Member	37 states	Turkey	Islamic standards
MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, Australia)	2013	Full Member	5 members	—	Middle powers group

Table 2. The Organisations of which Turkey is an Observer / Dialogue Partner / Participant Member

Organisation (Full Name)	Turkey's Member Status	Status Granted Year	Start Date	Full Members	Leading State	Notes
Organisation of American States (OAS)	Observer	1998	1948	35 states	United States	Americas
South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)	Dialogue Partner	2012	1985	8 states	India	South Asia
Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR)	Dialogue Partner	2010	1991	4 full members	Brazil	South America
South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP)	Participant	1996	1996	11 states	Romania / Bulgaria	Southeast Europe
Regional Arms Control Verification and Implementation Assistance Centre (RACVIAC)	Participant	2000	2000	16 states	Croatia	Arms control in Southeast Europe
Association of Caribbean States (ACS)	Observer	2000	2000	35 states	Cuba / Mexico	Caribbean basin
European Union (EU)	Candidate	1999	1993	27 states	Germany / France	European States
African Union (AU)	Observer	2005	2002	55 states	Nigeria / South Africa	African continent
League of Arab States (Arab League)	Turkish-Arab Cooperation Forum	2008	1945	22 states	Egypt	Arab world
Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)	Participant	2008	2008	10 states	European Union	Southeast Europe
Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)	Strategic Dialogue	2008	2008	6 States	Saudi Arabia	Gulf Arab states
Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC)	Participant	2013	2011	33 states	Brazil / Mexico	Latin America
Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)	Dialogue Partner	2012	1996	9 states	China / Russia	Eurasian security & economy



Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)	Sectoral Dialogue Partner	2017	1967	10 states	Indonesia	Southeast Asia

Table 3. The Organisations of which Turkey is a Signatory / Associate / Other Status Member

Organisation (Full Name)	Status	Turkey's Membership Status	Leading State	Notes
Western European Union (WEU)	Associate Member (defunct)	Signatory / Associate / Other Status	France / United Kingdom	1992–2011
Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organisation (CTBTO)	Signatory	Signatory / Associate / Other Status	United States	Nuclear Test Ban Treaty
International Criminal Court (ICC)	Signatory no-ratified	Signatory /	The Netherlands	International Court

Thirdly, the tables above indicate that Turkey has initiated several regional organisations with specific commonality, whether driven by national interests or national identities. It might not have been possible to begin a regional organisation with the Soviet Union under the political, economic, systemic conditions before the 1990s, but it has been possible after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and then Turkey launched diplomatic relations to deal with a fair share of maritime issues with all the states that have shore in the Black Sea, including Russia. Again, in association with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey sought to engage with post-Soviet Eurasian politics through ethnic commonalities in Central Asia. Leading an organisation with newly independent Turkic states clearly demonstrates the regionalisation of world politics in Turkish foreign policy. In terms of new conceptualization of international system in world politics, Regional Multipolarity, refraining from direct involvement of superpower (US) as in the times of bi-polarity and also interacting with the states which were under rival superpower (Soviet Union) provide clues on basic features of the "Regional Multipolarity", that is, self-initiated regional politics origins from its national interest rather than being a part of superpower's agents in a region. In practice, the early years of the International Organisation of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSOY) did not yield positive results due to the resistance of Turkic states, but in the long term, they paved the way for the establishment of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS). As a founding member and leading power, Turkey has been successful in agenda setting, bolstering Turkic identity among members and initiating economic, political, cultural, and even military projects as part of OTS's members.

The fourth characteristic of a regional multipolarity system is a balance in interaction between leading states and other regional or international organisations. In this case, Table 2 suggests that, as an emerging power, Turkey applied for and was granted a status in most of the regional organisations. Turkey's status in these regional organisations, from Sectoral Dialogue Partner to Observer, enables it to strategically observe regional dynamics and position itself accordingly at both the regional and international levels of politics. In addition, high-level participation in these regional organisations also creates official platforms that allow Turkey to clarify its position on



specific issues among member states and offer potential political and economic contributions. In this regard, despite initiating a foreign policy orientation discussion (Öniş and Kutlay 2017), Turkey has always been a significant player in world politics, from Latin America to Southeast Asia, and, even as an observer, is able to discern regional developments and their international (global) implications.

In recent years, Turkey's instrumentalisation of regional institutions has become increasingly visible through its leadership initiatives, agenda-setting capabilities, and examples of institutional entrepreneurship. For instance, within the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS), Turkey has moved beyond cultural solidarity to develop concrete economic and security cooperation. The Turkish Investment Fund, established under Ankara's diplomatic leadership in 2023, demonstrates Turkey's use of OTS as a strategic platform to promote regional financial integration and infrastructure investments. Similarly, during its term as president of the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), Turkey aligned its energy and transportation agendas with the Middle Corridor and Zangezur Corridor projects, thereby successfully integrating its national priorities into the regional policy framework (Tüfekçi, Bayrak, and Uslu 2024). These examples demonstrate that Turkey utilises regional organisations not only as platforms for cooperation but also as tools for transforming its national interests into collective regional policies.

In addition, Turkey's diverse participation patterns, ranging from full membership to dialogue partnership (e.g., founding/leading roles in organisations such as the BSEC and D-8; and observer or dialogue partner status in structures such as ASEAN, MERCOSUR, and the SCO), demonstrate a versatile and flexible foreign policy approach. Furthermore, Turkey's hosting of high-level events such as the 2021 Istanbul Turkic Council Summit and the 2023 Ankara MIKTA Ministerial Meeting positions it not only as an active participant but also as a norm-setting and policy-making regional actor. These trends demonstrate that Turkey does not passively participate in regional institutions; rather, it strategically utilises them to consolidate its position as a central actor within the multipolar order.

Conclusion

While Barry Buzan sought a theoretical integration between structural realism and international society, he emphasised that "...international societies, like international systems, will emerge initially within regional subsystems and only later develop at the level of the international system as a whole" (Öniş 2009). It was the time of post-bipolarity and referred to the evolution of international society into an international system from regional origins to global extent. By the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, it is highly likely that a regionally oriented bloc, interacting and competing with each other, will emerge as one of the great powers or great power candidates (emerging powers) that dominates international politics.

This paper is a humble intellectual effort to introduce a new conceptualisation in international system studies, arguing that current international world politics can be defined as regional multipolarity. Previous systemic studies at the regional level have



mostly conceptualised this phenomenon under the subsystem conceptualisation, but this paper elevates the regional orientation of world politics to the global level. Given that global rivalry between the US and China currently occupies the focus, this paper proposes an alternative conceptualisation through the emerging powers' struggle to integrate their own foreign and regional policies into world system studies. They neither bandwagon super nor great powers nor bow their head to international pressure. Instead, they seek to enforce their regional economic, security, political and military visions to be accepted by the other powers, whether super, great or hegemonic powers.

In summary, the paper argued that there are four main principles of regional multipolarity. First, Turkey, as an emerging power, has regional organisations that extend beyond economic development to encompass political interests, security provision, and cultural and ethnic identity. Secondly, they, including Turkey, continue to collaborate with the embedded international organisations but do not refrain from establishing a regional organisation that serves their national interests. Thirdly, there is no need for emerging powers to be encouraged or supported by a superpower or hegemonic power to initiate a regional organisation. Lastly, emerging powers, such as Turkey, not only focus on the regional organisations they initiate but also participate in almost all regional organisations by obtaining official status in other regional organisations.

Within the context of the paper, it might sound as if there are no more super/hegemonic/great powers in world politics, but it does not suggest that. It indicates that the number of emerging powers increases, and that leads to the formation of regional organisations led by emerging powers, which would drive a new international system in world politics. To support this argument, there should be more extensive case studies focusing on other emerging powers. That is for sure. Only in this way can the four principles of regional multipolarity and their conceptualisation be tested. This paper, as mentioned earlier, is a preliminary step to an extended examination of regional multipolarity.

References

- Abbott, Kenneth W., and Duncan Snidal. 1998. 'Why States Act through Formal International Organisations'. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42(1): 3–32. doi:10.1177/0022002798042001001.
- Acharya, Amitav. 2005. 'Do Norms and Identity Matter? Community and Power in Southeast Asia's Regional Order'. *The Pacific Review* 18(1): 95–118. doi:10.1080/09512740500047199.
- Balci, Ali. 2019. 'A Three-Level Analysis of Turkey's Crisis with the U.S.-Led Order'. *Insight Turkey* 21(4): 13–24.
- Balci, Ali. 2023. 'Do Gladiators Fight for Their Masters? Voting Behaviour of the US-Promoted United Nations Security Council Members in the Early Cold War'. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 56(1): 36–41. doi:10.1017/S1049096522001019.



- Bayram, Duygu Çağla, and Özgür Tüfekçi. 2018. 'Turkey's Black Sea Vision and Its Dynamics'. *Karadeniz Arastirmaları* 15(57): 1–16. doi:10.12787/KARAM1272.
- Buzan, Barry. 1991. 'New Patterns of Global Security in the Twenty-First Century'. *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 67(3): 431–51. doi:10.2307/2621945.
- Buzan, Barry. 1993. 'From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime Theory Meet the English School'. *International Organisation* 47(3): 327–52.
- Buzan, Barry, and Richard Little. 1994. 'The Idea of "International System": Theory Meets History'. *International Political Science Review* 15(3): 231–55. doi:10.1177/019251219401500302.
- Buzan, Barry, and Richard Little. 2000. *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations*. Oxford University Press on Demand.
- Buzan, Barry, and Ole Wæver. 2003. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511491252.
- Chirot, Daniel, and Thomas D. Hall. 1982. 'World-System Theory'. *Annual Review of Sociology* 8: 81–106.
- Clark, W. Hartley. 1966. 'The Problem of Membership in International Organisation'. (2).
- Claude, Inis L. 1966. 'Collective Legitimation as a Political Function of the United Nations'. *International Organisation* 20(3): 367–79.
- Dag, Rahman. 2025. 'Uluslararası Sistem Değişikliği ve İsrail-Gazze Savaşı Görünümü'. *Nous Academy Journal* 2025(4): 75–87. doi:10.5281/zenodo.15210377.
- Dag, Rahman. 2026. 'Security Provision of International Systems: International (Global) and Regional Institutions'. In *Palgrave Handbook on International Security: Legitimation and Post-Modernity*.
- Degterev, Denis Andreevich. 2019. 'Multipolar World Order: Old Myths and New Realities'. *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations* 19(3): 404–19. doi:10.22363/2313-0660-2019-19-3-404-419.
- Destradi, Sandra. 2008. 'Empire, Hegemony, and Leadership: Developing a Research Framework for the Study of Regional Powers'. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. doi:10.2139/ssrn.1143902.
- Elrod, Richard B. 1976. 'The Concert of Europe: A Fresh Look at an International System'. *World Politics* 28(2): 159–74.
- Garzón Pereira, Jorge F. 2014. 'Hierarchical Regional Orders: An Analytical Framework'. *Journal of Policy Modelling* 36: S26–46. doi:10.1016/j.jpolmod.2013.10.007.
- Godehardt, Nadine, and Dirk Nabers, eds. 2011. *Regional Powers and Regional Orders*. London: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203815984.
- Goertz, Gary, and Kathy Powers. 2014. *Regional Governance: The Evolution of a New Institutional Form*. Social Science Research Centre Berlin (WZB).



- Hurrell, Andrew. 1995. 'Explaining the Resurgence of Regionalism in World Politics'. *Review of International Studies* 21(4): 331–58. doi:10.1017/S0260210500117954.
- 'International Organisations / Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs'. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/sub.en.mfa?7cafe2ef-78bd-4d88-b326-3916451364f3> (October 14, 2025).
- Kahler, Miles. 1992. 'Multilateralism with Small and Large Numbers'. *International Organisation* 46(3): 681–708.
- Katzenstein, Peter J. 2005. *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium*. Cornell University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvrf8bbc> (October 19, 2025).
- Keohane, Robert O. 1988. 'International Institutions: Two Approaches'. *International Studies Quarterly* 32(4): 379–96. doi:10.2307/2600589.
- Knorr, Klaus Eugen, and Sidney Verba. 2019. *International System: Theoretical Essays*. Princeton University Press.
- Koslowski, Rey, and Friedrich V. Kratochwil. 1994. 'Understanding Change in International Politics: The Soviet Empire's Demise and the International System'. *International Organisation* 48(2): 215–47. doi:10.1017/S0020818300028174.
- Kutlay, Mustafa, and Ziya Öniş. 2021. 'Turkish Foreign Policy in a Post-Western Order: Strategic Autonomy or New Forms of Dependence?' *International Affairs* 97(4): 1085–1104. doi:10.1093/ia/iab094.
- Levaggi, Ariel Gonzalez. 2019. *Confrontational and Cooperative Regional Orders: Managing Regional Security in World Politics*. London: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780429198199.
- Martin, Lisa L. 1992. 'Interests, Power, and Multilateralism'. *International Organisation* 46(4): 765–92.
- Neuvonen, Päivi Johanna. 2019. 'Transforming Membership? Citizenship, Identity and the Problem of Belonging in Regional Integration Organisations'. *European Journal of International Law* 30(1): 229–55. doi:10.1093/ejil/chz007.
- Öniş, Ziya. 2009. *The New Wave of Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey*. Danish Institute for International Studies.
- Öniş, Ziya. 2010. 'Contesting for Turkey's Political "Centre": Domestic Politics, Identity Conflicts and the Controversy over EU Membership'. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 18(3): 361–76. doi:10.1080/14782804.2010.507919.
- Öniş, Ziya, and Mustafa Kutlay. 2017. 'The Dynamics of Emerging Middle-Power Influence in Regional and Global Governance: The Paradoxical Case of Turkey'. *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71(2): 164–83. doi:10.1080/10357718.2016.1183586.
- Özdemir, Haluk. 2015. 'An Inter-Subsystemic Approach in International Relations'. *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 4(1): 5–5. doi:10.20991/allazimuth.167329.



- Pennetta, Piero. 2015. 'International Regional Organisations: Problems and Issues'. In *Evolutions in the Law of International Organisations*, Brill, 70–115. doi:10.1163/9789004290198_005.
- Schenk, Hans Georg. 1947. *The Aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars: The Concert of Europe, an Experiment*. Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner. <https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1130282269977829376> (May 26, 2025).
- Schimmelfennig, Frank. 2003. 'Strategic Action in A Community Environment: The Decision to Enlarge the European Union to the East'. *Comparative Political Studies* 36(1–2): 156–83. doi:10.1177/0010414002239375.
- Shannon, Thomas R. 2018. *An Introduction to the World-System Perspective: Second Edition*. 2nd edn New York: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780429494154.
- Stewart-Ingersoll, Robert, and Derrick Frazier. 2012. *Regional Powers and Security Orders: A Theoretical Framework*. London: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203804995.
- Taylor, Paul Graham. 1993. *International Organisation in the Modern World: The Regional and the Global Process*. Pinter.
- Thompson, William R. 1973. 'The Regional Subsystem: A Conceptual Explication and a Propositional Inventory'. *International Studies Quarterly* 17(1): 89–117. doi:10.2307/3013464.
- Tüfekçi, Ozgur, and Zehra Aksu. 2024. 'Energy Regionalism in Theory and Practice: The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation'. *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 27(3): 29–57. doi:10.5782/2223-2621.2024.27.3.29.
- Tüfekçi, Özgür, Muharrem Bayrak, and Hakan Uslu. 2024. 'Connectivity and Corridors: Türkiye's Middle Corridor Vision through International Trade'. *PERCEPTIONS: Journal of International Affairs* 29(2): 120–47.
- Tüfekçi, Ozgur, and Rahman Dag. 2022. 'Whither Global Governance? An Approach to World Politics'. In *Trends and Transformations in World Politics*, London: Bloomsbury, 137–50. <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/trends-and-transformations-in-world-politics-9781793650245/> (October 22, 2025).

MIGRATION AS SOFT POWER IN REGIONAL INSTITUTIONS: THE CASE OF SOUTH ASIA AND THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC)

AKM AHSAN ULLAH

akmahsanullah@gmail.com

FASS, University of Brunei Darussalam (Brunei)

Abstract

Migration has become an important soft power tool for South Asian states working with regional organisations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This article examines how South Asian countries strategically manage labour migration policies within the GCC framework to protect the interests of their migrants while countering domestic political pressures and economic dependencies. The study asks the question: How do South Asian states use labour migration in regional institutions such as the Gulf Cooperation Council to balance national sovereignty and international cooperation in a multipolar world, where established powers like the United States and emerging great powers such as China compete for influence? Drawing on Nye's concept of soft power and Keohane's neoliberal institutionalism, this article argues that migration is not merely a socio-economic phenomenon but also a diplomatic advantage. South Asian states use migration to negotiate favourable terms with GCC countries, ensure economic security through remittances and at the same time maintain their regional influence. By analysing migration-related agreements, labour policies and bilateral commitments, this article highlights the dual role of regional organisations as collaborators and challengers of global institutions. The findings show that labour migration policy in the Gulf Cooperation Council is a balancing act of strengthening economic interdependence while managing the complexities of sovereignty and international politics.

Keywords

Migration Diplomacy, Soft Power, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Labour Mobility, Regional Institutions.

Resumo

A migração tornou-se uma importante ferramenta de soft power para os Estados do sul da Ásia que trabalham com organizações regionais, como o Conselho de Cooperação do Golfo (CCG). Este artigo examina como os países do sul da Ásia gerem estrategicamente as políticas de migração laboral no âmbito do CCG para proteger os interesses dos seus migrantes, ao mesmo tempo que combatem as pressões políticas internas e as dependências económicas. O estudo coloca a seguinte questão: como é que os Estados do sul da Ásia utilizam a migração laboral em instituições regionais como o Conselho de Cooperação do Golfo para equilibrar a soberania nacional e a cooperação internacional num mundo multipolar, onde potências estabelecidas como os Estados Unidos e grandes potências emergentes como a China competem por influência? Baseando-se no conceito de soft power de Nye e no institucionalismo neoliberal de Keohane, este artigo defende que a migração não é apenas um fenómeno socioeconómico, mas também uma vantagem diplomática. Os Estados do sul da



Ásia utilizam a migração para negociar condições favoráveis com os países do CCG, garantir a segurança económica através de remessas e, ao mesmo tempo, manter a sua influência regional. Ao analisar acordos relacionados com a migração, políticas laborais e compromissos bilaterais, este artigo destaca o duplo papel das organizações regionais como colaboradoras e desafiadoras das instituições globais. As conclusões mostram que a política de migração laboral no Conselho de Cooperação do Golfo é um ato de equilíbrio entre o reforço da interdependência económica e a gestão das complexidades da soberania e da política internacional.

Palavras-chave

Diplomacia migratória, Soft Power, Conselho de Cooperação do Golfo (CCG), Mobilidade laboral, Instituições regionais.

How to cite this article

Ullah, Akm Ahsan (2025). Migration as Soft Power in Regional Institutions: The Case of South Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 24-47. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.2>

Article submitted on 13th February 2025 and accepted for publication on 07th August 2025.





MIGRATION AS SOFT POWER IN REGIONAL INSTITUTIONS: THE CASE OF SOUTH ASIA AND THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC)

AKM AHSAN ULLAH

Introduction

The intersection of migration, diplomacy, international relations and soft power has become a heated topic in academic discourse, which reflects the growing recognition of migration as a foreign policy tool and geopolitical challenge. Scholars argue that states are increasingly using migration diplomacy - through visa policies, labour agreements and refugee negotiations - to advance strategic interests and influence international relations (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2020, p. 857; FitzGerald, 2019). The concept of migration as soft power is also gaining traction (Ullah, 2025, p. 6). Research shows how diasporas, humanitarian action and cultural exchange influence global perceptions and the legitimacy of states (Kunz, Lavenex, & Panizzon, 2011, p. 69). As global migration crises intensify and political disputes over border controls and human rights intensify, academic debates on migration and diplomacy continue to evolve, bridging the gap between migration studies and international relations theory (Betts, 2011, 112; Gamlen, 2019, p. 43).

The migration corridor between South Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries is one of the most important labour flows in the world. This movement is largely driven by the economic interdependence between the two regions, with the GCC's demand for labour, particularly in construction, domestic work and services, coinciding with surplus labour from South Asia in search of better economic prospects. In 2024, there were approximately 16 million legal migrants living in the GCC region, a significant proportion of whom were from South Asian countries (Jawed, 2024; Ullah et al, 2024). In countries such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, foreign labour accounts for up to 80% of the total population, highlighting the central importance of migration in shaping the demographic and economic landscape of the Gulf (Ullah, 2025a, p. 9). However, this labour mobility is fraught with complex issues, including governance challenges, labour rights issues and the evolving role of regional organisations in facilitating and regulating these movements.

Migration has always been a defining feature of relations between South Asia and the GCC. Millions of workers, primarily from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka, seek employment in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain (Rahman, 2013). These migration flows are driven by a combination of economic inequalities, the demand for labour in the GCC, the supply of labour in South



Asia and long-standing historical ties between the regions (Wickramasekara, 2014, p. 3; Ullah, 2017, p. 7). South Asian migrants make up a significant proportion of the labour force, particularly in sectors such as construction, domestic work and services (ILO, 2021).

Migrants make a significant contribution to the economy of the country of origin and the destination country — the former through remittances, the latter by increasing the labour force (World Bank, 2022). In addition to economic contributions, migration plays a crucial role in shaping social and diplomatic relations between South Asia and the GCC. At the societal level, migration fosters transnational networks, cultural exchanges and diasporic influences that shape perceptions and policies in both sending and receiving countries (Gardner, 2011, p. 74-77). At the political level, migration-related negotiations, such as labour agreements and advocacy for migrants' rights, have become an integral part of bilateral and regional diplomacy (Kapiszewski, 2010, pp. 11-14). This interdependence emphasises the links between South Asia and the GCC, making migration a force influencing regional dynamics. These relationships are further strengthened through soft power strategies, where states utilise cultural diplomacy, economic cooperation and historical ties to cultivate influence and deepen mutual engagement without resorting to coercion.

The concept of soft power, introduced by Nye (2004), refers to a country's ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. While traditionally associated with cultural diplomacy and media influence, migration has emerged as an important but under-researched dimension of soft power. Migrants act as informal ambassadors to promote interpersonal and economic relations and influence public perceptions of their home countries in host countries (Shain & Barth, 2003; Khara, 2020, p. 453).

In the context of South Asia-GCC relations, migration serves as an instrument of soft power by strengthening economic ties, facilitating cultural diffusion and shaping labour diplomacy (Wagle, 2024). Countries with large expatriate populations, such as India and Pakistan, often use their diaspora for diplomatic benefits, including negotiating better labour conditions, investment opportunities and political influence within the GCC (Rahman, 2013, p. 8).

Regional institutions such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are playing a growing role in managing migration (Baldwin-Edwards, 2011, p. 18). While SAARC has sought to address migrants' rights through various initiatives, the GCC has historically pursued strict labour policies that restrict migrant integration. However, changing geopolitical and economic realities — such as the 2022 World Cup in Qatar and the Saudi Vision 2030 — have prompted GCC states to reassess their labour policies and engagement with South Asian countries (Mencutek & Gurses, 2024, p. 308).

This study argues that migration is an important instrument of soft power in relations between South Asia and the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC). Migrants contribute not only to economic and labour markets, but also to diplomatic negotiations, cultural exchange and transnational networks. Therefore, the presence of South Asian migrants and diasporas in the GCC reinforces an interdependence that influences regional politics,



labour diplomacy and socio-cultural integration (Gardner, 2011). As GCC countries increasingly seek to diversify their economies and strengthen their global influence, the role of South Asian migrants as facilitators of economic, cultural and political engagement is becoming more apparent (Wagle, 2024). This paper argues that migration should not only be seen as a problem of labour mobility, but also as a strategic tool of influence within the regional institutional framework.

This article adopts a qualitative methodology based on document analysis, drawing on primary and secondary sources such as bilateral agreements, policy documents, institutional reports, and academic literature. The central problematic addressed in this study is the under-exploration of how migration functions as a tool of soft power in the interactions between South Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The scope of the study is limited to labour migration from five key South Asian countries (India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka) to six GCC states (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman). The purpose of this study is to explore the strategic deployment of migration in regional diplomacy, particularly through the lens of soft power and institutional cooperation. The core argument is that South Asian states leverage labour migration to exercise soft power and negotiate favourable political and economic outcomes, while GCC countries use migration management to consolidate their regional authority and project strategic interests. The article also explores the role of regional institutions in managing migration as soft power by examining how SAARC and the GCC approach the management of migration and how these institutions can improve cooperative frameworks to maximise the benefits of migration.

Literature Review

The existing literature on migration and soft power largely focuses on the role of diaspora diplomacy, cultural influence and economic remittances in shaping international relations (Nye, 2004; Gamlen, 2019). Scholars have explored how migration can serve as a tool of state influence, particularly in the context of global powers such as the United States and China (Kapur, 2010; Shain & Barth, 2003). While China exhibits several characteristics of a superpower, such as military modernisation, global economic reach, technological innovation, and assertive foreign policy, there is still ongoing scholarly debate on whether it has achieved *full-spectrum superpower* status akin to the United States (Buzan, 2011, p. 11; Shambaugh, 2020). Most analysts position China as a “near-peer competitor” or “great power” with substantial regional hegemony and growing global clout, but not yet the capacity to unilaterally reshape global governance institutions or maintain a global military presence equivalent to the U.S. (Mearsheimer, 2014; Ikenberry, 2018, pp. 9, 12). The global order is more accurately characterised today as multipolar or “nonpolar” with asymmetric interdependencies, rather than strictly bipolar (Haass, 2008, p. 46; Stuenkel, 2016, p. 99).

However, there is little research on how regional institutions, particularly in the global South, utilise migration as a form of soft power. Studies on SAARC and the GCC have examined economic interdependence and labour migration but often neglect the diplomatic and strategic dimensions of migration governance (Weiner, 1995; Naujoks,



2013, pp. 99-112). This article fills this gap by analysing how migration policies and labour mobility in South Asia and the GCC act as instruments of regional influence, shaping economic dependencies, cultural ties and political negotiations. By examining institutional frameworks and political narratives, this study highlights the role of migration beyond economic transactions and positions it as a key mechanism of regional soft power dynamics.

Joseph S. Nye introduced the concept of soft power and defined it as the ability of a country to achieve its goals through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2004). Soft power results from the appeal of a country's culture, political values and foreign policy. Nye emphasises that soft power is about influencing the preferences of others through attractiveness and appeal, as opposed to hard power, which relies on military or economic means (Nye, 2021).

The application of soft power to migration is multifaceted. Migrants serve as cultural ambassadors to strengthen the image and influence of their home countries abroad. Thus, diasporic communities often promote their native cultures, languages and traditions, which contributes to a positive perception of their countries of origin. In addition, the policies that host countries pursue towards migrants can reflect their soft power. An inclusive and welcoming immigration policy can increase the attractiveness of a country, while restrictive measures can weaken its soft power. Thus, migration overlaps with soft power through both the actions of migrants and the policies of states (Massey et al., 1993).

Theories of labour migration provide a framework for understanding the cross-border movement of workers. Dual labour market theory assumes that developed economies have a segmented labour market consisting of a primary sector with stable, well-paid jobs and a secondary sector characterised by low-paid, unstable employment (Piore, 1979, pp. 122-28). Native workers generally occupy jobs in the primary sector, while migrants are often employed in the secondary sector, as these jobs are unattractive to native labour. This structural demand in industrialised countries acts as a pull factor for labour migration.

Push-pull models, on the other hand, explain migration through a combination of factors that drive people out of their home countries (push factors) and pull them into the host countries (pull factors) (Massey et al., 1993). The push factors include economic hardship, unemployment and political instability, while the pull factors include better employment opportunities, higher wages and political stability in the destination countries (Weldemariam, Ayanlade, Borderon & Möslinger, 2023). This model emphasises the interaction between the conditions in the countries of origin and destination that influence migration flows. However, I am against the push-pull model because it undermines human agency.

The migration of South Asian labour to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has been significant, driven by the demand for labour in the rapidly developing economies of the Gulf. Research shows that migrants from countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka make up a significant portion of the labour force in GCC countries, particularly in sectors such as construction, domestic work and services (Kapiszewski, 2010). These workers often face challenges, including restricted labour



rights and dependence on the kafala sponsorship system, which ties their legal residency to their employers. Despite these challenges, remittances from GCC countries play a crucial role in the economies of South Asian countries and contribute to poverty alleviation and economic development (Mazumder, 2018, P. 477).

SAARC and the GCC are regional organisations that play a role in managing migration, albeit with a different focus. SAARC has been primarily concerned with migration issues relating to intra-regional movement and the protection of migrant workers abroad. However, its ability to enforce binding agreements is limited, and much of migration policy continues to take place bilaterally between individual South Asian countries and GCC states (Mazumder, 2018; Thiollet, 2022, P. 55).

The GCC, consisting of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, has taken measures to regulate the influx of foreign labour. These measures include labour laws and sponsorship schemes that directly affect the rights and mobility of migrant workers (Noel, 2019). Although the GCC has made some efforts towards labour reforms, challenges remain in ensuring fair treatment and protection of migrant workers (Kapiszewski, 2010, P. 5).

Table 1. Estimated % of South Asians in the GCC

GCC Country	Total Population (millions)	Percentage of Foreign Nationals	South Asian Migrants %
United Arab Emirates	10.03	88%	59.4 (includes Indian 38.2%, Bangladeshi 9.5%, Pakistani 9.4%)
Qatar	2.88	~90%	56
Kuwait	4.27	~70%	61
Bahrain	1.78	~50%	41
Oman	4.52	~50%	27
Saudi Arabia	35.84	37%	38

Source: Author, 2025 (calculated from various sources, such as MPI, respective departments of the GCC countries).

While there is extensive research on migration patterns, the effects on the labour market and the socio-economic aspects of migration, the use of migration as an instrument of diplomatic influence has not yet been sufficiently researched. In particular, how countries use their expatriate communities to strengthen their soft power or how migration policy is used to strengthen diplomatic relations is an area that should be further explored. Understanding these dynamics is crucial to grasping the full spectrum of migration's impact on international relations (Nye, 2021, pp. 198-99).

Existing studies often focus either on the experiences of South Asian migrants in GCC countries or on the policies of individual GCC states towards foreign workers. There are a few comparative analyses that examine the role of regional institutions such as SAARC and the GCC in managing migration. Comparative studies could shed light on the effectiveness of regional and bilateral approaches, the potential for policy harmonisation and the lessons that can be drawn from the different governance models. Such research



could lead to more coherent and comprehensive migration policies that benefit both sending and receiving countries (Massey et al., 1993, P. 435).

Conceptualising migration and soft power

Migration is a multifaceted phenomenon driven by economic, political, environmental and social factors, all of which play an important role in shaping mobility patterns in South Asia (de Haas, Castles and Miller, 2020; Bastia, Lulle & King, 2022). Economic factors are the most prevalent, as millions of people from countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal migrate to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and beyond to find better employment opportunities and escape poverty and unemployment (Rahman, 2012; Khadria, Thakur and Mishra, 2022, P. 3). Political instability and conflicts such as those in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar have also led to forced displacement and asylum-seeking migration (Bhatia et al., 2021; Ullah, 2018, P. 10; Ullah et al, 2024, P. 8). Environmental factors, including climate-induced displacement in coastal areas of Bangladesh due to rising sea levels and cyclones, have forced rural populations to move to cities or abroad (Sakapaji, 2023). Social factors such as caste discrimination, gender inequality and cultural aspirations also shape migration decisions as many people seek upward mobility or escape social constraints (Deshingkar, 2006, pp. 92-3; Hugo, 2008). In South Asia, where migration is deeply embedded in historical, economic and geopolitical contexts, these factors intersect to create complex patterns of mobility that are important for both regional economies and global labour markets (Wickramasekara, 2014).

South Asia is one of the largest sources of migrant labour in the world. Countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka send significant numbers of labour to the GCC countries — Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain (Ditto, 2022). As a regional bloc, the GCC relies on these migrants for construction, domestic labour and employment in the service sector, making migration a crucial component of its economic model (Kapiszewski, 2010). However, migration is not just an economic transaction. It also plays a role in shaping diplomatic and socio-political relations between these regions and influences the dynamics of soft power.

Soft Power and Migration

Soft power, a concept popularised by Joseph Nye (2004), refers to the ability of a state to influence others through attraction rather than coercion, using culture, political values and foreign policy. Migration plays a crucial role in soft power dynamics as the diaspora contributes to cultural diplomacy, remittances and the global reputation of their home countries (Khanna and Moorthy, 2017, P. 295). The presence of South Asian migrants in the Gulf Co-operation Council represents both a challenge and an opportunity in this soft power equation.

South Asian governments are utilising their expatriate populations to build political and economic ties with the GCC states. For example, India and Bangladesh have used diplomatic channels to negotiate better labour conditions and protect the rights of



migrants to strengthen their influence in the region (Mencutek & Gurses, 2024). In particular, Bangladesh has entered into Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLAs) and Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with a number of destination countries to regulate migration flows and ensure the welfare of its workers abroad. These agreements aim to establish formal mechanisms for labour migration that ensure that the rights and welfare of migrant workers are protected (ILO, 2024). Similarly, India has been proactive in negotiating bilateral agreements to protect its migrant workers. These diplomatic initiatives not only aim to protect the rights of migrant workers but also serve to strengthen bilateral relations and increase influence in the region (Population Council, 2024).

The cultural presence of South Asian migrants in the Gulf region further enhances their soft power. Bollywood, cricket and South Asian cuisine have found a prominent place in the Gulf to shape regional cultural preferences and foster interpersonal relations (Thiollet and Assaf, 2021). At the same time, the influence of the Gulf Cooperation Council in South Asia manifests itself through investment, religious ties and funding of educational institutions that promote Arab-Islamic cultural narratives (Mathew, 2014, p. 110). These reciprocal cultural and economic exchanges demonstrate how migration serves as a medium of soft power in regional geopolitics.

Regional Institutions and Migration Governance

Regional institutions play a critical role in strengthening cooperation between sending and receiving countries. In South Asia, SAARC has made limited progress in developing comprehensive migration governance frameworks (Wickramasekara, 2014). Although South Asian states recognise the economic importance of migration, labour mobility agreements are often negotiated bilaterally rather than through a regional framework. On the other hand, the Gulf Cooperation Council acts as a regional bloc with a relatively coordinated migration policy that focuses primarily on temporary labour migration under the Kafala system (Baldwin-Edwards, 2011). This system, which ties the residency status of migrant workers to their employers, has been criticised for its restrictive nature and vulnerability to exploitation (Bua, 2025). However, recent reforms in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates indicate a gradual shift towards better labour rights, partly in response to international pressure and the role of South Asian governments advocating for their migrant workers (Mencutek & Gurses, 2024). Despite their different regional governance structures, South Asia and the GCC share common challenges in the area of migration, including labour rights, human trafficking and the need for sustainable migration policies (Rahman, 2013, P. 12).

Neoliberal Institutionalism and Migration as Soft Power in Regional Institutions

The neoliberal institutionalism of Robert Keohane (1984) provides a useful theoretical framework for analysing migration as a form of soft power in regional institutions, particularly in South Asia and the GCC. Neoliberal institutionalism emphasises the role of international institutions in facilitating cooperation between states despite the anarchic



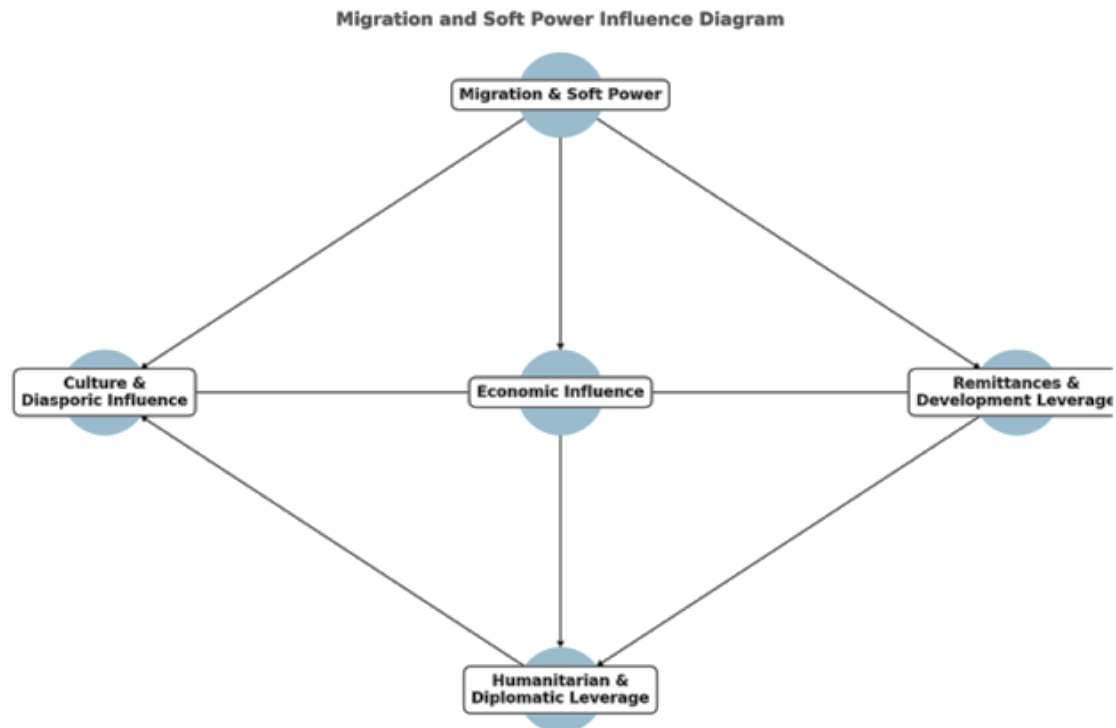
nature of the international system. In contrast to realism, which emphasises power politics and the self-interest of states, Keohane argues that institutions help to mitigate uncertainty, reduce transaction costs and create predictable frameworks for cooperation.

In the context of migration governance, neoliberal institutionalism emphasises how regional organisations provide platforms for states to coordinate their policies on labour mobility, remittances and migrants' rights. The theory argues that states engage in institutionalised cooperation because it is mutually beneficial, even when there are absolute power differences. Keohane (1989) states that institutions persist because they provide structured incentives that are aligned with the interests of states and make co-operation more durable than ad hoc agreements.

Applying Keohane's framework to migration as soft power, I argue that South Asian countries use their migrant labour as strategic assets within regional institutions. The GCC states, which are highly dependent on South Asian migrant labour, work with countries such as India, Bangladesh and Pakistan through bilateral and multilateral agreements that influence migration flows. Neoliberal institutionalism claims that both labour-sending and labour-receiving countries prefer institutionalised cooperation to unilateral policies. Such co-operation reduces uncertainty, promotes economic interdependence and strengthens diplomatic relations (Keohane & Martin, 1995, pp. 44-46).

Keohane's reflections on complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977) suggest that migration creates asymmetric dependencies that can be used for soft power. Although the South Asian states are economically weaker than the Gulf Cooperation Council, they are gaining influence through labour diplomacy, remittances and diaspora engagement. Institutions such as the SAARC's Colombo Declaration on Migrant Workers (2008) and the GCC's Kafala system reforms show that migration governance is shaped by institutionalised norms rather than pure power politics.

The concept of soft power is linked to theories of norm diffusion and migration diplomacy as well. Betts (2011) and Kunz et al. (2011) argue that regional and bilateral migration frameworks serve as instruments for promoting state preferences, wherein institutional norms are strategically translated across contexts. Diaspora governance, as discussed by Gamlen (2019), highlights how states cultivate expatriate communities as reservoirs of legitimacy, identity projection, and strategic influence. Furthermore, Shain and Barth (2003) emphasise that diasporas act as epistemic communities that promote soft power through transnational linkages. Migration diplomacy, particularly in South-South corridors like South Asia-GCC, reflects what Froilan and Tsourapas (2021) describe as 'weapons of the weak,' where migrant-sending states use vulnerability as leverage. These concepts expand our understanding of migration as soft power beyond traditional state-to-state negotiations to include multi-level, norm-based, and identity-driven processes.

**Figure 1.** Migration and soft power tools

Migration is an important instrument of soft power, as it shapes economic, cultural and diplomatic relations between the countries of origin and host countries. Economically, labour migration creates interdependence and forces receiving countries to engage diplomatically with migrants' countries of origin to ensure labour supply and policy coordination (Ullah, 2025, pp. 6-8). Culturally, migrant communities act as informal ambassadors, fostering transnational connections and influencing societal perceptions, which in turn shape bilateral relations. Remittances serve as a powerful development tool that strengthens economic stability in sending countries and increases their bargaining power in regional partnerships (Froilan & Gerasimos, 2021). The treatment of migrants has significant diplomatic implications, influencing trade agreements, foreign policy decisions and regional cooperation frameworks. Taken together, these dimensions make migration an important driver of soft power that strengthens transnational relationships and influences geopolitical dynamics.

Linking migration to soft power

Migration has increasingly become an instrument of soft power in regional institutions, influencing diplomatic relations, economic policy and cultural exchange. Migration and soft power have gained prominence in recent years in the context of migration between South Asia and the Gulf Co-operation Council and regional institutions. Labour migration from South Asia to the GCC plays a crucial role in shaping economic interdependencies (Ullah, 2025a, pp. 4-6). Countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri



Lanka send millions of workers to the GCC economies, where they are employed in various sectors such as construction, domestic work and services (Rahman, 2013). The economic dependence of GCC countries on these migrants emphasises their importance in sustaining infrastructure projects, services and industries (Kapiszewski, 2010). This dependence has, in turn, enabled South Asian states to use migration as an economic and diplomatic tool in regional geopolitics. For example, India and Bangladesh have used labour migration agreements and remittance flows as bargaining tools in diplomatic negotiations with GCC states to influence labour rights policies and bilateral relations (Rajan and Arokkiaraj, 2022, P. 210).

Diplomatic Negotiations Over Labour Rights and Protections

The issue of labour rights has become a key topic in diplomatic talks between South Asian countries and the GCC states. According to reports, agreements such as the 2018 India-UAE Labour Mobility Partnership and Bangladesh's Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Saudi Arabia reflect the ongoing diplomatic negotiations (Wickramasekara, 2014). While labour-exporting countries seek better conditions for their citizens abroad, the GCC states remain cautious about granting greater rights due to domestic political and economic considerations (Fargues & Shah, 2017). A precise example of diplomatic negotiations on labour rights between the GCC and South Asia is the 2014 labour agreement between India and Saudi Arabia, which introduced better protection for Indian domestic workers. Under the Musaned system, India successfully negotiated minimum wages, an online contract verification system and employer accountability measures to prevent exploitation and wage delays. This agreement reflected India's diplomatic influence as the country is a significant contributor to the Saudi Arabian economy (Ministry of External Affairs, India, 2014).

Remittances as a Geopolitical Tool for South Asian States

Remittances from migrant workers in the GCC represent a major economic advantage for South Asian countries. For example, remittances from the GCC countries to Bangladesh accounted for almost 51% of total remittance flows in 2021 (World Bank, 2022). Similarly, Pakistan and India also receive significant remittances (Sasikumar & Timothy, 2015, pp. 5-6). These financial flows not only serve economic purposes but also shape diplomatic engagement, as South Asian governments often adopt pro-migration policies to sustain remittance flows and maintain favourable relations with GCC countries. For example, when Saudi Arabia imposed restrictions on the recruitment of Bangladeshi workers in 2016, Dhaka used its remittance flows (which accounted for more than 12% of Bangladesh's GDP) to negotiate a resumption of labour recruitment. In 2018, diplomatic efforts led to the lifting of the recruitment freeze, resulting in more than 100,000 Bangladeshi workers finding employment under revised labour conditions. With over \$18 billion in annual remittances from the UAE, India has strategically integrated labour migration into its foreign policy (Bortolazzi, Khan, 2023). In 2017, India secured preferential treatment for its labour force in the UAE in high-level diplomatic talks, ensuring better labour protection, simplified visa processing and a framework for



resolving wage disputes. In return, India strengthened cooperation with the UAE in the energy sector and secured investments in infrastructure and oil reserves.

India-UAE Labour Diplomacy and Strategic Partnerships

India's engagement with the UAE is an example of how migration can work as soft power. The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between India and the UAE, signed in 2017, incorporates labour migration into broader economic and security cooperation (Kugiel, 2017, pp. 72-9). The introduction of eMigrate schemes and labour protection initiatives reflects India's strategic use of migration diplomacy to protect its expatriate workforce while strengthening bilateral relations (Mencutek & Gurses, 2024).

Launched by the Indian government in 2014, the eMigrate system is an online platform designed to facilitate the recruitment of Indian labour for employment abroad, particularly in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including the UAE. It ensures transparency by registering recruitment agencies, employers and workers, verifying contracts and providing grievance redressal mechanisms. Labour diplomacy between India and the UAE has benefited from eMigrate as it has helped reduce exploitative recruitment practices and strengthen bilateral labour agreements. For example, eMigrate was integrated into recruitment processes under the 2018 India-UAE Labour Cooperation Agreement to ensure that Indian workers receive vetted contracts and fair wages before migrating. In addition, the system has helped monitor remittance flows and strengthen India's strategic partnership with the UAE, which is home to over 3.5 million Indian expatriates (Fargues, Shah, & Brouwer, 2019). EMigrate has strengthened the diplomatic influence of India in securing better labour conditions and investment opportunities in the UAE.

Bangladesh-Kuwait Migration Agreements

The labour migration agreements between Bangladesh and Kuwait are an example of the crucial role of migration in promoting bilateral diplomatic relations and economic interdependence. Kuwait's dependence on Bangladeshi labour, particularly in the domestic and construction sectors, has led to negotiations on wage structures, legal protections and recruitment mechanisms (Rahman, 2013). An important impact of the migration agreements between Bangladesh and Kuwait is the legalisation of undocumented Bangladeshi workers in Kuwait. In 2020, Kuwait announced an amnesty programme that allowed thousands of irregular Bangladeshi migrants to either regularise their status or return home with impunity. This decision was preceded by diplomatic negotiations in which Bangladesh emphasised the economic contribution of its migrant workers and the importance of continued cooperation in the field of labour.

The agreements have also led to increased labour recruitment, particularly in construction, domestic work and healthcare. In 2022, Kuwait lifted a decades-long restriction on hiring Bangladeshi labour, leading to a renewed influx of migrant workers under improved contractual conditions, such as guaranteed minimum wages and better grievance mechanisms. This has strengthened the inflow of remittances to Bangladesh,



which continues to be an important pillar of the country's foreign exchange reserves and further strengthens economic relations and diplomatic engagement between the two nations.

Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Migration Flows and Religious Diplomacy

Pakistan's migratory relations with Saudi Arabia go beyond the economic dimension and also include religious and cultural ties. As home to Islam's holiest sites, Saudi Arabia plays an important role in shaping Pakistan's religious diplomacy, with migration being a key aspect of this connection (Malit & Al-Youha, 2016). The presence of millions of Pakistani workers (2.64 million according to a 2023 estimate) in Saudi Arabia facilitates cultural and economic exchanges and strengthens bilateral relations through soft power mechanisms based on religious identity and mutual interests (Mir & Kazi, 2021, pp. 120-3). An important impact of migration flows between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia is the deepening of religious diplomacy, particularly through labour migration and Saudi influence on Pakistan's religious institutions. Pakistani workers in Saudi Arabia serve as an important diplomatic bridge that strengthens Pakistan's strategic relationship with the Kingdom. A notable example is the 2019 Saudi-Pakistani agreement, which resulted in \$20bn of Saudi investment in Pakistan, including support for infrastructure and energy projects (Goñi, Ramírez & Vidal, 2020). This agreement was facilitated in part by Pakistan's dependence on Saudi Arabia for remittances (which amount to more than \$7bn annually) and economic aid (Goñi, Ramírez & Vidal, 2020, P. 23, 45. 65). In return, Pakistan has always aligned its foreign policy with Saudi Arabia's regional interests, including participation in the Riyadh-led Islamic Military Counter-Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) (GLMM, 2020). Saudi Arabia's financial and ideological support has influenced religious institutions in Pakistan, particularly through the funding of madrassas (Islamic seminaries), which have shaped religious discourse and sectarian dynamics in the country. These migration-related diplomatic relationships illustrate how labour mobility goes beyond economic contributions and influences foreign policy, religious institutions and geopolitical alignments between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

Case Analysis: migration diplomacy in South Asia–GCC relations

Here, I operationalise the conceptual framework of soft power and neoliberal institutionalism to examine how South Asian countries strategically engage with GCC states through migration diplomacy. Migration is not merely a socio-economic process in this context; it is a diplomatic currency used by labour-sending states to shape bilateral and regional negotiations. While South Asian states such as India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan are economically and politically weaker in comparison to oil-rich Gulf monarchies, they have acquired soft power leverage through the sheer volume of their expatriate labour force, the economic significance of remittances, and their capacity to organise institutional cooperation. This dynamic interplay reflects the principles of complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 2012), whereby economic asymmetries are counterbalanced by institutional and normative engagement.



The labour diplomacy of India with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) provides a salient example. With over 3.5 million Indian nationals residing in the UAE, India has successfully utilised its demographic presence to negotiate better labour protections through instruments such as the eMigrate system and the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement (Mencutek & Gurses, 2024). Similarly, Bangladesh has entered into multiple bilateral agreements with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, focusing on wage structures, worker protections, and amnesty programmes for undocumented migrants. In 2020, Bangladesh's diplomatic lobbying led Kuwait to regularise thousands of Bangladeshi workers, reflecting the state's ability to convert demographic presence into diplomatic influence (Rahman, 2013).

Pakistan's migratory relations with Saudi Arabia illustrate how migration diplomacy intertwines with religious and cultural soft power. With over 2.6 million Pakistanis in Saudi Arabia, labour relations are deeply embedded in broader religious diplomacy, which facilitates strategic aid flows and political alignment, such as Pakistan's participation in Saudi-led coalitions (Mir & Kazi, 2021). These cases underscore how labour-sending states invoke diasporic, religious, and economic ties to project influence, negotiate rights, and shape the terms of migration governance.

On the receiving side, GCC states such as Qatar and the UAE have also instrumentalised migration for soft power projection. Qatar's labour reforms in preparation for the 2022 FIFA World Cup—including modifications to the kafala system—were in part the outcome of diplomatic pressure from South Asian governments and international organisations (Human Rights Watch, 2022). These reforms enhanced Qatar's global reputation while preserving essential labour supply chains. Meanwhile, the UAE's "Golden Visa" programme has targeted highly skilled South Asian professionals, reshaping migration into a mutually beneficial framework of talent diplomacy.

Regional institutions play an auxiliary but important role in facilitating this diplomacy. Although SAARC has limited enforcement capacity, it has articulated collective norms, such as the 2008 Colombo Declaration on the Protection and Welfare of Migrant Workers. The GCC, while more effective in policy coordination, still relies on national-level regulations. Nonetheless, institutional dialogues—such as GCC-India migration forums—highlight growing convergence on migration management. These empirical cases validate my theoretical premise: that migration functions as a medium of soft power and a platform for institutional cooperation. Through strategic use of labour diplomacy, South Asian states turn structural dependencies into diplomatic opportunities, while GCC states adapt migration governance to maintain economic competitiveness and geopolitical legitimacy.

South Asia: Strategic Use of Migration

India's diaspora diplomacy: India, which hosts one of the largest diasporas in the world (over 18 million people), has effectively utilised its migrants to strengthen its soft power globally (Naujoks, 2013). The Indian government is working with the diaspora through initiatives such as the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas and the Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) programme to strengthen cultural and economic ties. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE),



for example, the large number of Indian expatriates (approximately 3.5 million) has fostered strong bilateral relations that have led to strategic investments such as the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between the UAE and India in 2022 (Shain & Barth, 2003; Khara, 2020, P. 14).

Bangladesh's labour migration and remittance diplomacy: Bangladesh has over 10 million migrants worldwide, a significant number of whom live in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Malaysia. Remittances account for more than 6% of its GDP (World Bank, 2023), which strengthens its influence in regional negotiations. For example, Bangladesh has negotiated a better wage structure and labour protection for its expatriate workers in Saudi Arabia through diplomatic channels, strengthening labour migration as a soft power tool (Rahman, 2012).

Pakistan's engagement in the Gulf region: With over 4 million Pakistanis in the Gulf Cooperation Council, Pakistan has used its migrant labour force to secure economic and diplomatic cooperation, especially with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In 2019, Saudi Arabia pledged a USD 3 billion aid package to Pakistan, largely due to the presence of Pakistani workers in the Kingdom.

The GCC: Migration and Soft Power Diplomacy

If migration is managed effectively, it serves as a powerful soft power instrument both in South Asia and in the Gulf Cooperation Council. For the countries of origin, it provides economic stability through remittances and strengthens diplomatic engagement. For the host countries, it promotes economic growth, strengthens regional ties and improves international reputation. In the evolving global order, the use of migration for strategic regional cooperation will continue to be a crucial element of soft power diplomacy.

The GCC's heavy reliance on foreign labour from South Asia has influenced its foreign policy and diplomatic relations with source countries in many ways. **Economic diversification and labour diplomacy of the KSA:** As part of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia is keen to attract highly skilled foreign labour while maintaining close relations with sending countries. For example, the reform of Saudi Arabia's labour policy, Nitaqat, in 2021 led to tensions with South Asian governments, resulting in negotiations to ease restrictions on workers (Ennis and Blarel, 2022).

Qatar and the 2022 FIFA World Cup: Qatar's reliance on migrant workers from Nepal, India and Bangladesh to build infrastructure for the World Cup led to international scrutiny of labour conditions (Ullah, 2024, pp. 9-10; Ullah et al, 2020, pp. 8-11). For example, the introduction of labour reforms in 2021, including the abolition of the kafala system, was a direct result of diplomatic negotiations and international pressure (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

The UAE's strategic use of migration for diplomatic influence: The UAE has successfully used migration as a soft power tool by promoting initiatives such as the Golden Visa Programme, which targets highly skilled foreigners. For example, the introduction of long-term visas for skilled workers has strengthened the UAE's diplomatic and economic relations with India and the Philippines (Gargash, 2023, p. 4).



South Asian states have used labour migration as a diplomatic tool to negotiate beneficial agreements, promote economic interdependence and strengthen their regional presence (Kunz, 2021). The above evidence is consistent with Nye's (2004) concept of soft power and Koehan's liberal institutionalism, which emphasise influence through cultural, economic and institutional means rather than coercion.

While soft power theories suggest that migration can enhance mutual cooperation and influence, this dynamic is complicated by real-world governance challenges. Although GCC states are economically reliant on migrant labour, they often implement restrictive labour policies and kafala systems that limit the influence of South Asian countries (Gardner, 2011, P. 77). Countries that send labour struggle to provide adequate protection due to power imbalances in managing migration. This divergence between theory and practice shows the complexity of using migration as a soft power tool in regional institutions.

Conclusion

This study critically examines the role of migration as a soft power instrument in the institutional framework of South Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). While migration has traditionally been analysed from an economic and labour market perspective, this article argues that it goes beyond its material dimensions and functions as a strategic resource for both sending and receiving states. South Asian countries use their migrant workers to negotiate favourable labour contracts, strengthen diplomatic relations and maintain economic stability through remittances. At the same time, GCC countries use migration to drive their economic expansion, consolidate their position in global labour markets and strengthen their geopolitical influence. By conceptualising migration as more than a socio-economic process, this study highlights its importance as a mechanism that shapes regional diplomacy, promotes economic interdependencies and facilitates cultural transmission, contributing to a broader framework of international relations and soft power dynamics.

What the research suggests is that South Asian countries, particularly India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, strategically deploy labour migration in bilateral negotiations to secure favourable labour conditions and to influence GCC labour market reforms. These diplomatic engagements are not limited to worker protections but extend to trade, energy, and security collaborations. Remittance inflows, constituting significant portions of GDP for countries like Bangladesh and Nepal, are actively used as leverage in diplomatic negotiations with the GCC, exemplifying how economic dependencies evolve into tools of regional influence. Migrant communities in the GCC serve as informal agents of cultural diffusion, facilitating people-to-people ties and enhancing the soft power of their countries of origin. From Bollywood and cricket to cuisine and religious institutions, these transnational linkages deepen diplomatic trust.

While SAARC's influence remains limited due to its weak enforcement mechanisms, the GCC, under external pressure and economic transformation agendas, is increasingly open to labour reform. This illustrates an evolving institutional environment where labour-sending and -receiving countries are recalibrating their cooperative



arrangements. Despite the perceived power imbalance, South Asian states demonstrate agency in shaping migration governance, leveraging their indispensability to Gulf economies. This suggests that soft power can emerge even in asymmetrical relationships, challenging traditional realist assumptions.

In answering the research question, *How do South Asian states use labour migration in regional institutions such as the GCC to balance national sovereignty and international cooperation?*, the study concludes that migration is both a geopolitical strategy and a diplomatic asset. South Asian states, although often economically weaker, exercise considerable influence through collective bargaining, remittance diplomacy, and diaspora mobilisation. The study fills the existing gap in the literature by reconceptualising migration as a tool of soft power within South-South regional institutions. While most studies have focused either on bilateral labour arrangements or the socio-economic impacts of migration, this article situates migration at the intersection of foreign policy, institutional negotiation, and regional diplomacy, particularly in the Global South context, which remains underexplored (Gamlen, 2019; Adamson & Tsourapas, 2020; Mencutek & Gurses, 2024).

The novelty of this study lies in the application of Nye's theory of soft power and Keohane's neoliberal institutionalism to migration policy. By viewing migration as a strategic diplomatic tool and not just an economic necessity, this study offers new insights into the power asymmetries, institutional negotiations and political interactions between South Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council. It shows that despite their economic vulnerability, South Asian migrant-sending countries exert considerable influence through labour diplomacy and leverage the indispensable role of their expatriates in the Gulf economies. Conversely, GCC states, while reliant on migrant labour, operate careful labour policies to maintain control over their expatriate workforce, reflecting a complex interplay between dependency and sovereignty. From a regional perspective, this study has significant implications for the management of migration. The analysis suggests that South Asian governments could strengthen their bargaining power by adopting collective bargaining strategies rather than engaging in fragmented bilateral negotiations. Similarly, in their efforts to diversify their economies under initiatives such as Saudi Vision 2030 and the UAE's long-term visa programmes, GCC states need to recalibrate their migration policies to attract skilled labour while addressing persistent human rights concerns.

The far-reaching significance of this study lies in its contribution to migration and soft power research. It expands the understanding of migration as an instrument of influence that goes beyond remittances and economic exchange, shaping political narratives, cultural diplomacy and regional geopolitics. As global migration patterns continue to evolve, recognising the soft power potential of migration is crucial for the development of policies that promote sustainable and equitable transnational mobility.

References

Adamson, F. B., & Tsourapas, G. (2020). The migration state in the Global South: Nationalising, developmental, and neoliberal models of migration management.



International Migration Review, 54(3), 853–882.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/019791831987>

Baldwin-Edwards, M. (2011). *Labour immigration and labour markets in the GCC countries: National patterns and trends*. Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, London School of Economics.

Bastia, T., Lulle, A., & King, R. (2022). Migration and development: The overlooked roles of older people and ageing. *Progress in Human Geography*, 46(4).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325221090535>

Betts, A. (2011). *Global migration governance*. Oxford University Press.

Bhatia, A., Vicente, S. L., & Devakumar, D. (2021). Forced migration and health in South Asia: A review of evidence and policy recommendations. *The Lancet Global Health*, 9(2), e137–e145.

Bortolazzi, O., & Khan, N. (2023). From 'brain drain' to 'capital gain': Indian skilled migration to the UAE. In M. M. Rahman & A. Al-Azm (Eds.), *Social change in the Gulf region* (Vol. 8). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-7796-1_14

Bua, E. G. (2025). Modern slavery: The myth generated by migrants or the socio-economic aggression of the mighty? In D. C. Kelly (Ed.), *The chaos of contemporary slavery: Emerging research and perspectives*. IntechOpen.
<https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.1008734>

Buzan, B. (2011). The Inaugural Kenneth N. Waltz Annual Lecture: A world order without superpowers? Decentred globalism. *International Relations*, 25(1), 3–25.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117810396999>

De Haas, H., Castles, S., & Miller, M. J. (2020). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world* (6th ed.). Guilford Press.

Deshingkar, P. (2006). Internal migration, poverty and development in Asia. *IDS Bulletin*, 37(3), 88–100. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2006.tb00272.x>

Ennis, C. A., & Blarel, N. (Eds.). (2022). *The South Asia to Gulf migration governance complex*. Bristol University Press.

Fargues, P., & Shah, N. M. (2017). *Migration to the Gulf: Policies in sending and receiving countries*. Gulf Research Centre.

Fargues, P., Shah, N. M., & Brouwer, I. (2019). *Working and living conditions of low-income migrant workers in the hospitality and construction sectors in the United Arab Emirates* [Report]. Gulf Labour Markets, Migration, and Population Programme (GLMM).
https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/65986/Report_GLMM02.pdf

FitzGerald, D. (2019). *Refuge beyond reach: How rich democracies repel asylum seekers*. Oxford University Press.

Gamlen, A. (2019). *Human geopolitics: States, emigrants, and the rise of diaspora institutions*. Oxford University Press.



Froilan, T. M., & Tsourapas, G. (2021). Weapons of the weak? South–South migration and power politics in the Philippines–GCC corridor. *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1(3), ksab010. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksab010>

Gardner, A. (2011). Gulf migration and the family. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 44(1), 69–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2011.576043>

Haass, R. N. (2008). The age of nonpolarity: What will follow U.S. dominance. *Foreign Affairs*, 87(3), 44–56. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20032650>

Hamadah, F. (2022). Kafala and social reproduction: Migration governance regimes and labour relations in the Gulf. In C. A. Ennis & N. Blarel (Eds.), *The South Asia to Gulf migration governance complex* (pp. 173–189). Bristol University Press. <https://doi.org/10.56687/9781529221510-011>

Gargash, A. (2023). *UAE economic diplomacy report 2023*. Diplomatic Academy. <https://www.agda.ac.ae/docs/default-source/2023/uae-economic-diplomacy-report-2023/-uae-economic-diplomacy-report-2023.pdf>

Goñi, N., Ramírez, R., & Vidal, A. (2020, April). *Pakistan: Strategic analysis report*. Centre for Global Affairs & Strategic Studies, University of Navarra. <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs>

Gulf Labour Markets and Migration. (2020). *Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, Pakistan* (2021). <https://gulfmigration.grc.net>

Human Rights Watch. (2022). *Qatar: Reforms needed to protect migrant workers post-World Cup*. <https://www.hrw.org>

Demirbas, A., Omar Al-Sasi, B., & Nizami, A.-S. (2017). Recent volatility in the price of crude oil. *Energy Sources, Part B: Economics, Planning, and Policy*, 12(5), 408–414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15567249.2017.1300022>

Ikenberry, G. J. (2018). The end of liberal international order? *International Affairs*, 94(1), 7–23. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241>

International Labour Organisation (ILO). (2014). *SAARC commits to helping migrant workers*. <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/saarc-commits-helping-migrant-workers>

International Labour Organisation (ILO). (2021). *Labour migration in the Gulf Cooperation Council: Challenges and opportunities*. ILO Publications.

International Labour Organisation (ILO). (2023). *Labour market trends in the GCC: Migrant workers and policy shifts*. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40asia/%40ro-bangkok/%40ilo-dhaka/documents/publication/wcms_683744.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

International Labour Organisation (ILO). (2024). *Assessment guide for bilateral agreements and memoranda of understanding on labour migration, with a special focus on Bangladesh*.



Jawed, N. (2024). Indian migration to Gulf Cooperation Council countries: Trends, challenges, and prospects. *International Journal of Emerging Knowledge Studies*, 3(1), 19–26.

Kapiszewski, A. (2010). *Gulf migration and the political economy of labour governance*. The Middle East Institute. https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Migration%20Gulf_Viewpoints.pdf

Kapur, D. (2010). *Diaspora, development, and democracy: The domestic impact of international migration from India*. Princeton University Press.

Keohane, R. O. (1984). *After hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the world political economy*. Princeton University Press.

Keohane, R. O. (1989). *International institutions and state power: Essays in international relations theory*. Westview Press.

Keohane, R. O., & Martin, L. L. (1995). The promise of institutionalist theory. *International Security*, 20(1), 39–51. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539214>

Keohane, R. O., & Nye, J. S. (2012). *Power and interdependence: World politics in transition* (4th ed.). Longman.

Khadria, B., Thakur, N., & Mishra, R. (2022). Governing migration for development from the Global Souths: Migration, health and development in India, South Asia and China: Perspectives in the COVID-19 era. *Policies and Development Review*, 14. <https://doi.org/10.4000/poldev.4833>

Khanna, S., & Moorthy, P. (2017). Analysing India's soft power functioning in the twenty-first century: Possibilities and challenges. *India Quarterly*, 73(3), 292–311. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48505543>

Khara, N. K. (2020). Diaspora and foreign policy: A global perspective. *International Journal of Political Science*, 6(4), 12–20. <https://doi.org/10.20431/2454-9452.0604002>

Kugiel, P. (2017). *India's soft power: A new foreign policy strategy*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315272139>

Kunz, R. (2021). *The political economy of global remittances: Gender, governmentality, and neoliberalism*. Routledge.

Kunz, R., Lavenex, S., & Panizzon, M. (Eds.). (2011). *Multilayered migration governance: The promise of partnerships*. Routledge.

Malit, F. T., & Al-Youha, A. (2016). Labour migration in the GCC: Challenges and policy responses. *Migration Policy Institute*.

Massey, D. S., Arango, J., Hugo, G., Kouaouci, A., Pellegrino, A., & Taylor, J. E. (1993). Theories of international migration: A review and appraisal. *Population and Development Review*, 19(3), 431–466. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2938462>

Mathew, P. A. (2014). [Review of *Migration, remittances and development in South Asia*, by S. Kelegama]. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 1(1), 107–115. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48601770>



Mazumdar, A. (2018). India's soft power diplomacy under the Modi administration: Buddhism, diaspora and yoga. *Asian Affairs*, 49(3), 468–491. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2018.1487696>

Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014, October 25). *Can China rise peacefully?* *The National Interest*. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/can-china-rise-peacefully-10204>

Mencutek, Z. S., & Gurses, U. (2024). Governance and politics of migration in the Middle East. In *Migration governance* (pp. 297–311). Edward Elgar.

Ministry of External Affairs, India. (2014). *India-Saudi Arabia sign labor agreement for domestic workers' recruitment*. Government of India. <https://mea.gov.in>

Mir, Z. A., & Kazi, R. (2021). The contours of Saudi Arabia–Pakistan relations and its impact on India. *Asian Journal of International Affairs*, 1(Special Issue), 118–134.

Naufal, G., & Genc, I. (2020). *The economics of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) migrant labour market*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Naujoks, D. (2013). *India's soft power: Diaspora and foreign policy*. Routledge.

Noel, W. (2019). *Modernism in Qatar: The South Asian migrant struggle and the evolution of the Kafala system* (Senior Independent Study Thesis No. 8362). The College of Wooster. <https://openworks.wooster.edu/independentstudy/8362>

Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. Public Affairs.

Nye, J. S. (2021). Soft power: The evolution of a concept. *Journal of Political Power*, 14(1), 196–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2021.1879574>

Piore, M. J. (1979). *Birds of passage: Migrant labour and industrial societies*. Cambridge University Press.

Population Council. (2024). *Insights into labour migration in India and Bangladesh*. https://popcouncil.org/insight/insights-into-labor-migration-in-india-and-bangladesh/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Rahman, M. M. (2012). Bangladeshi labour migration to the Gulf states: Patterns of recruitment and processes. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement*, 33(2), 214–230. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2012.689612>

Rahman, M. M. (2013). Migrant indebtedness: Bangladeshis in the GCC countries. *International Migration*, 53(6). <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12084>

Rajan, S. I., & Arokkiaraj, H. (2022). Return migration from the Gulf region to India amidst COVID-19. In A. Triandafyllidou (Ed.), *Migration and pandemics* (pp. 207–226). Springer. [https://doi.org/\[Insert if available\]](https://doi.org/[Insert if available])

Rutledge, E. J. (2017). Labour markets in the Gulf and South Asian migration. In M. Z. Rahman, T. Yong, & A. Ullah (Eds.), *Migrant labour in the Gulf: Challenges and responses* (pp. 95–112). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71821-7_6

Sakapaji, S. C. (2023). Climate-induced migration: a new normal? A systematic research analysis of the climate-induced migration crisis in Bangladesh. *European Journal of*



Theoretical and Applied Sciences, 1(4), 463–489.
[https://doi.org/10.59324/ejtas.2023.1\(4\).42](https://doi.org/10.59324/ejtas.2023.1(4).42)

Sasikumar, S. K., & Timothy, R. (2015). *Migration, remittances, and development: Lessons from South Asia*. ILO Publications.

Shain, Y., & Barth, A. (2003). Diasporas and international relations theory. *International Organisation*, 57(3), 449–479. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818303573015>

Shambaugh, D. (2020). *China's future*. Polity Press.

Stuenkel, O. (2016). *Post-Western world: How emerging powers are remaking global order*. Polity Press.

Thiollet, H. (2022). Illiberal migration governance in the Arab Gulf. In J. Hollifield & N. Foley (Eds.), *Understanding global migration* (pp. 50–80). Stanford University Press.

Thiollet, H., & Assaf, L. (2021). Migrant cosmopolitanism in Emirati and Saudi cities: Practices and belonging in exclusionary contexts. In C. Lejeune, D. Pagès-El Karoui, C. Schmoll, & H. Thiollet (Eds.), *Migration, urbanity and cosmopolitanism in a globalised world* (pp. 1–13). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67365-9_12

Ullah, A. K. M. A. (2025). Migration as international relations. *Global Networks*, 26(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.70016>

Ullah, A. K. M. A., Lee, S. C. W., & Hassan, N. H. P. H. (2024). *Southeast Asia in pre-and post-COVID-19: Economy, society, mobility and religion*. Routledge.

Ullah, A. K. M. A., Chin, S. C. W. L., Hassan, N. H., & Nawaz, F. (2020). Xenophobia in the GCC countries: Migrants' desire, dream and despair. *Global Affairs*, 6(2), 203–223.

Ullah, A. K. M. A. (2017). Irregular migration from Bangladesh to the Gulf: Is combating it a governance challenge? In P. Fargues & N. M. Shah (Eds.), *Irregular migration to the Gulf: The role of legislation, policies and practices* (pp. 377–401). Cambridge University Press.

Ullah, A. K. M. A. (2018). Geopolitics of conflicts and refugees in the Middle East and North Africa. *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 5(3), 258–274.

Ullah, A. K. M. A. (2024). Emergence of Qatar in diplomacy in a complex world: Balancing soft power in regional affairs. *World Affairs*, 188(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1002/waf2.12051>

Ullah, A. K. M. A. (2025a). Connectivity and mobility: The transformative impact of BRI on migration dynamics in the MENA. *Politics & Policy*, 53(3), e70048. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.70048>

Varghese, V. J. (2023). Labour migration to the Gulf and India's emigration governance: Expanding bounds of protection. *Association of Asia Scholars*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0976399623117758>

Wagle, U. R. (2024). Labour migration, remittances, and the economy in the Gulf Cooperation Council region. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 12, 30. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-024-00390-3>



Weldemariam, L. F., Ayanlade, A., Borderon, M., & Möslinger, K. (2023). Dynamics and factors influencing return migration to Sub-Saharan Africa: A systematic review. *Heliyon*, 9(11), e18791. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e18791>

Wickramasekara, P. (2014). *Labour migration in South Asia: A review of issues, policies and practices*. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/ess/wpaper/id6347.html>

World Bank. (2022). *Migration and development brief 37: Remittances trends*. World Bank Publications.

World Bank. (2023). *Remittance inflows to South Asia: Trends and implications*. World Bank.

THE ROLE OF BRICS IN SUPPORTING EMERGING POWERS AT THE GLOBAL LEVEL: DEEPER INSTITUTIONAL COOPERATION AND ASSOCIATED CHALLENGES

CHRISTIAN PLOBERGER

plobchr@gmail.com

Lecturer, CBIS, Rajamangala University of Technology Tawan, Bangkok (Thailand)

Abstract

With the passage of time, BRICS has become not only a recognised cooperation of emerging states but also a focus for states of the so-called Global South to join. One may argue that those states are in search of additional support to enhance their international recognition and to ensure that their interests are taken into consideration at the global level. The question arises as to what extent BRICS, as a cooperation, can deliver on this expectation. Doing so would require BRICS to develop a strong institutional setting, to strengthen internal coherence, so that it can take on an influential role within the international system. However, this is where BRICS, like any other emerging organisation, faces a critical challenge. Stronger institutional development implies addressing and integrating the different interests of its members, while agreeing on a unified strategy as an organisation. The political, economic, and social heterogeneity of its members and the stated goal of supporting each member's national interest equally do not fit well with such strategic requirements. Failing to formulate a unified strategy, to deepen institutional cooperation, BRICS may not be able to deliver on what its members are expecting: to become a strong voice for their interests at the global level.

Keywords

BRICS; emerging power; institutional development; international organisation; international system.

Resumo

Com o passar do tempo, os BRICS tornaram-se não apenas uma cooperação reconhecida entre países emergentes, mas também um foco para os países do chamado Sul Global se unirem. Pode-se argumentar que esses países estão em busca de apoio adicional para aumentar o seu reconhecimento internacional e garantir que os seus interesses sejam levados em consideração a nível global. Surge a questão de até que ponto os BRICS, como cooperação, podem corresponder a essa expectativa. Para isso, seria necessário que os BRICS desenvolvessem um quadro institucional forte, reforçassem a coesão interna, para que pudessem assumir um papel influente no sistema internacional. No entanto, é aqui que os BRICS, como qualquer outra organização emergente, enfrentam um desafio crítico. Um desenvolvimento institucional mais forte implica abordar e integrar os diferentes interesses dos seus membros, ao mesmo tempo que se chega a um acordo sobre uma estratégia unificada como organização. A heterogeneidade política, económica e social dos seus membros e o objetivo declarado de apoiar igualmente os interesses nacionais de cada membro



não se coadunam bem com tais requisitos estratégicos. Se não conseguirem formular uma estratégia unificada e aprofundar a cooperação institucional, os BRICS poderão não ser capazes de corresponder às expectativas dos seus membros: tornar-se uma voz forte para os seus interesses a nível global.

Palavras-chave

BRICS; potência emergente; desenvolvimento institucional; organização internacional; sistema internacional.

How to cite this article

Ploberger, Christian (2025). The Role of BRICS in Supporting Emerging Powers at the Global Level: Deeper Institutional Cooperation and Associated Challenges. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 48-62. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.3>

Article submitted on 17th January 2025 and accepted for publication on 10th September 2025.





THE ROLE OF BRICS IN SUPPORTING EMERGING POWERS AT THE GLOBAL LEVEL: DEEPER INSTITUTIONAL COOPERATION AND ASSOCIATED CHALLENGES

CHRISTIAN PLOBERGER

Introduction

While its origins are based on financial market imaginations, BRICS has undergone a considerable transformation to become a recognisable cooperation aiming to facilitate the international status and interests of its members in global politics. In doing so, it may also contribute to a change within the existing international system, as the voices of emerging powers and countries of the Global South gain more recognition. After all, the existing international system is still based on the interests of the dominant powers in the aftermath of the Second World War and especially on the geopolitical interests of the United States, which was the most influential actor in creating the existing global institutional setting. However, the current distribution of economic power has changed from that in the years following the Second World War, and emerging powers demand to have a strong impact on global political-economic decision-making in accordance with their economic influence. The critical question is this: Can BRICS as an organisation deliver what its members are expecting from it, like a recognition of their interests and to enhance their decision-making power within global political-economic decision-making? As such, BRICS is facing the same challenges as other international cooperations and organisations: the struggle to align the various interests of its members so it can speak with one voice and consequently increase its impact. We should remember a key factor in global affairs: the internal strength of an organisation generates international recognition. Once again, will BRICS be able to deliver? This represents a vital question, not least when considering its origin, starting in the imagination of a finance investment manager with no political support in the beginning. However, BRICS has already undergone some impressive structural changes. After all, it has now become a forum where the political leaders of emerging powers regularly meet. Taking the advantage of hindsight, one can argue that, with the expansion from BRIC to BRICS, the inclusion of South Africa represented the first indication of internal structural change, as it no longer followed a single financial logic in selecting new members, as was the original argument. This signified a change towards the inclusion of political considerations when considering membership extension and set the foundation for what it has become today, a voice of emerging powers and of countries of the Global South. In doing so, it also raised its profile as a potential challenger to the existing international order, questioning the political influence of the existing global institutional setting, arguing that the current



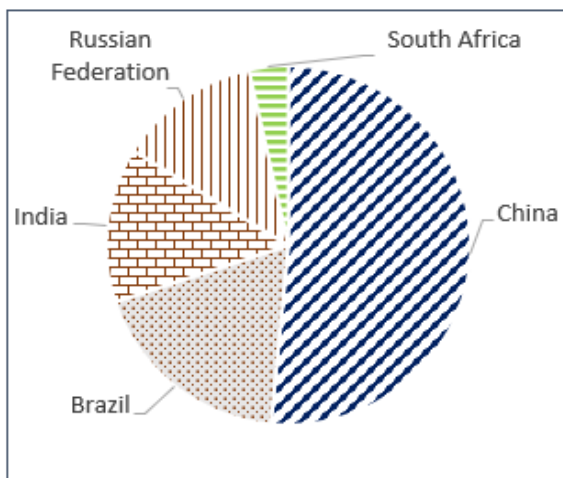
distribution of political-economic power represents a historical and outdated political-economic power distribution, which no longer corresponds with the current distribution of political-economic power. As recent membership expansion strongly indicates, its attractiveness as a cooperation for emerging powers is still rising. Not only has the membership increased considerably, but the number of associated members has also increased. However, with increasing membership, the internal complexity increases as well, since, after all, a principal stance within the BRICS cooperation is to support the interests of its members. When considering the impact of BRICS on the contemporary character of the international system, we also have to take into consideration how we interpret the international system from a structural perspective, what power constellation we can identify (uni-/ bi-/ or multipolarity), and what kind of dynamic drives changes within the international system.

An alternative forum for cooperation between emerging countries

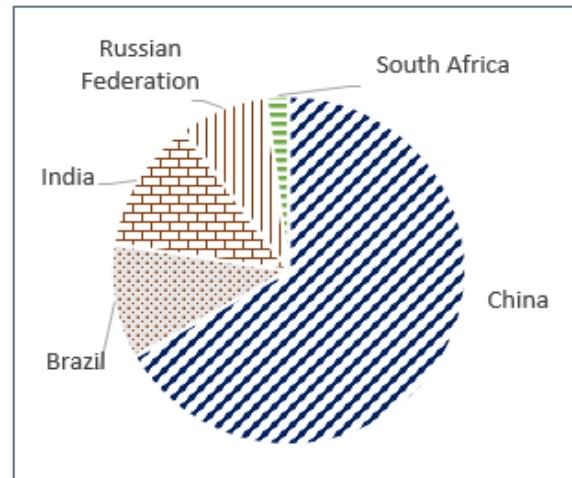
Own into the fact that BRICS members represent emerging powers, their influence as individual nations on the global level is rather limited and country-specific. While some members may generate an appreciable impact within their respective regions, to assert meaningful influence in global politics, they need to work together, and even then, the extent of their impact is not guaranteed. Indeed, asymmetric global economic and political influence and impact, different political systems have been a major characteristic of BRICS members from the very beginning, generating a practical challenge for cooperation. Comparing the size of the GDP of the original BRICS countries, this diversity becomes quite recognisable, with China clearly dominating. The four graphics below, covering a 14-year period in five-year intervals, indicate the dominant economic status of China among the group, as well as the increasing relevance of India over time. While there is no suggestion that China will manipulate the BRICS as an instrument for its own strategic rise, the GDP distribution among the original BRICS members also indicates a different level of global influence. While the recent increase in membership will extend the GDP size of the BRICS countries as a whole, it will have a smaller impact on the ranking among the BRICS countries. A long-running GDP growth rate comparison of the original BRICS countries shows a bit of a different picture, as between 2010 and 2019, China and India formed a closer group compared to the other members. Yet from 2021 to 2024, the data indicate a change with India taking the lead, with China, Brazil, and later Russia forming another group. While South Africa performs below this group. The growth data also indicate that the BRICS countries are less able to isolate themselves from overall global impacts. Thus, BRICS countries are not only confronted with a challenge of representation in the decision-making within the international institutional setting of the liberal international order, dominated by the United States, but also with an individual challenge, as most would not be able to exercise a meaningful impact on the global level as individual countries. Yet, one could argue that this provides additional incentives for cooperation and, in extension, for organisational development. Yet, as the original BRICS member are located in different regional settings, they also face different political-economic challenges within their respective regions, which in turn could generate an impact on their readiness to cooperate. Another, but related topic is that, for example,



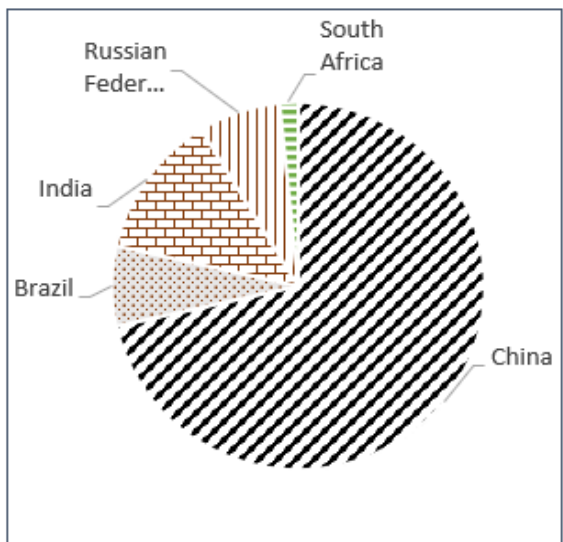
two BRICS members are in direct competition at the regional level, as is the case between India and China, which could also impact their readiness to cooperate. While Noort (2019, 462) describes BRICS as an informal diplomatic group, Nuruzzaman (2020, 59-60) identifies some of the critical internal weaknesses of BRICS, as it was not able to converge the foreign policy aims of its members into one shared foreign policy goal. This can be interpreted as a practical implication of the group's political and economic heterogeneity.



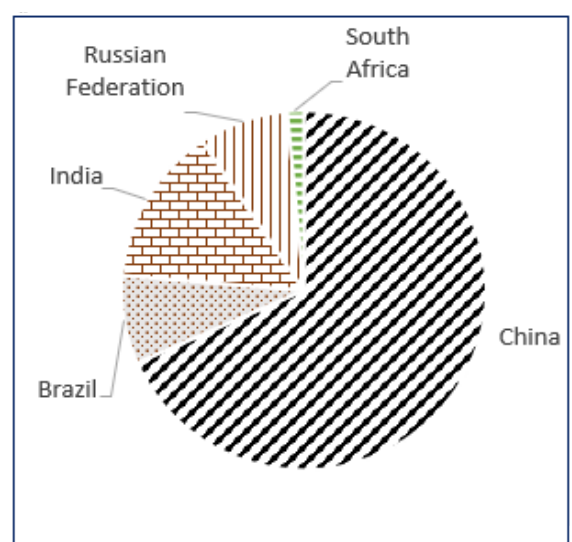
Derived from World Bank Data GDP current
US\$ distribution 2010



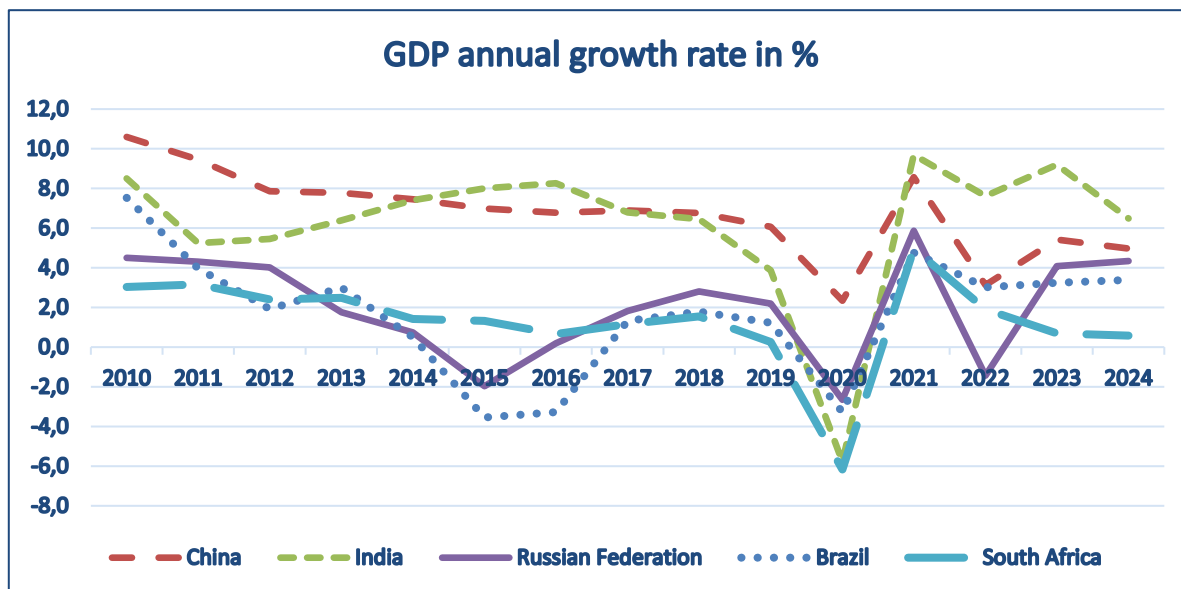
Derived From World Bank Data GDP current
US\$ distribution 2015



Derived from World Bank Data GDP current
US\$ distribution 2020



Derived from World Bank Data GDP current
US\$ distribution 2024



Source: Chart derived from online World Bank Data.

Indeed, BRICS's ability to influence global politics and the existing global order is linked with its ability to manage internal contradictions and to facilitate consensus among its members. Indeed, as asserted by van Noort, generating a comprehensive organisation-based narrative in support of it would be a preferable strategy (van Noort 2016). A more diverse membership will increase the challenge of generating such a narrative.

BRICS's international standing may be enhanced through the actions of some of its members. China's Belt and Road Initiative is the most prominent case. Certainly, India also has a strong development engagement with the countries in South Asia and Russia, with Central Asian countries, even though its position may be weakened because of the Ukraine war. That the BRICS countries are aiming to improve their international recognition by enhancing their relations with countries of the Global South is also recognised by Petrone (2019). Interestingly enough, Nayyar (2016) asks for caution because, while stronger engagement with the countries of the Global South offers a potential avenue for stronger South-South cooperation and international recognition of BRICS, it could also lead to a perception of what he describes as subimperialism, generating a new form of dependency associated with earlier forms of imperialism. India's engagement with the smaller states of South Asia, in combination with its self-perception of being the dominant leader of the region, may offer a good example. Even though South-South engagement could contribute to a BRICS narrative of the 'Voice of the South', so far, the BRICS members are only partly successful in doing so. Within this context, Nuruzzaman (2020, 61) assesses that BRICS's weak internal cohesion undermines its ability to formulate an alternative world vision. This, in turn, weakens its ability to challenge the existing international order, dominated by the United States. In this regard, we need to address a fundamental question: Does BRICS aim for a fundamental change of the existing international system, or does it aim for changes



within the existing international system? Or, as asked by Petrone (2019), are the BRICS members aiming to create a parallel or alternative system, or to create a new space for acting within the existing international liberal order? The first option aims to undermine and even completely change the existing global institutional setting, while the second option indicates a willingness to accept the existing global institutional setting, but demands that their interests are taken into consideration, resisting United States dominance and hegemonic policy behaviour within that global institutional setting. With regard to the potential systemic challenges that BRICS poses to the established liberal order, Stuenkel (2016) states that emerging countries are less interested in challenging the underlying norms of the existing liberal system but rather in institutionalising their enhanced power position. Similarly, Roberts (2015) argues that, while the BRICS countries contest the West's pretensions to permanent stewardship of the global institutional organisations, they do not demand a systemic change to the existing international system itself. Indeed, in their official statements, regular support for establishing global institutions can be identified, such as the World Bank, IMF, or the UN, but with a strong demand for structural power adjustment to give emerging powers a stronger role in decision-making.

Considering that every existing international system is based on the political, economic, and strategic interests of the dominant country, we should not be too surprised that the United States continues to explore and exploit its strong position to its advantage, even though it is quite successful in generating the image of a benevolent hegemon. With reference to the current existing international order, Ikenberry describes the existing contradictions within the rule-based liberal order as a 'hierarchical order with liberal characteristics' (Ikenberry 2012). Therefore, enhancing the influence of BRICS could offer some more impactful engagement of the countries of the Global South within the existing United States-dominated international system. Stuenkel (2016) points out that the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRICS-led New Development Bank (NDB) will strengthen the Global South's position within the existing global institutional setting. He adds that, while they will not challenge the existing global setting, they aim at decreasing the United States' institutional dominance within that setting. At the same time, we can observe what Ikenberry describes as the diffusion outward, the loss of the overwhelming power the United States once possessed (Ikenberry 2014). This, in turn, favours the position of emerging powers of the Global South. However, one still has to recognise the institutional weakness of BRICS as assessed by van Noort, who stated that their internal diversity undermines the generation and communication of a strategic narrative in supporting the BRICS position and its role in global politics (van Noort 2019, 465).

Institutional development could contribute to a stronger recognition of BRICS in global politics. Yet institutional development faces a number of challenges, which will be the focus of the next section.

Institutional development: Characterising international organisations

Taking into consideration that BRICS so far only represents a loose form of cooperation, a deeper institutional development could offer a strategy to enhance its global standing.



Transforming BRICS into a bona fide international organisation (IO) faces several serious challenges, even though one could argue that a degree of institutionalisation has already occurred since its first official meeting in Yekaterinburg in 2009. To apprehend the challenges involved, we should begin with a short assessment of IOs in general.

International organisations: Some general characterisations

When considering that BRICS aims to support the interests of its members and to address unequal decision-making power in global politics, a primary issue arises: how to strengthen BRICS's role in global politics and within the existing global institutional setting? Stronger cooperation between its members represents a critical step forward. Transforming the BRICS cooperation into an international organisation could offer a strategic response that would enhance its global role. However, there are various issues related to establishing an IO. To begin with, Keohane (1989, 166) reminds us that the promise of mutual benefits is the sine qua non for international institutions; otherwise, there is no reason for forming international institutions. Lugg (2024), meanwhile, points towards a general acknowledgement that international organisations are usually created by a great power to lock in a particular structural power distribution or to support the creation of one. The formation of an IO requires addressing another fundamental issue in international politics: trust. Based on the anarchic character of the international system and the associated security dilemma, countries can hardly trust each other. Yet forming an IO must be founded upon a process of generating trust among independent political units (Higgott, 2006). Indeed, transforming a loose cooperation into an IO requires a willingness for deeper cooperation. For Keohane (1984), cooperation requires that the actions of separate actors, who are not acting in pre-existent harmony, be brought into conformity. To facilitate such a process, IOs are based on certain rules and norms, which are institutionalised by treaties which members have to agree to and are expected to follow. March and Olsen (2006, 3-4) describe an IO as an enduring collection of rules and organised practices, which in turn facilitates a process described as institutional logic, generating predictability of members' behaviour. However, Keohane (1989, 3) reminds us that while an IO generates predictability and trust among its members, it also limits the choices available for its members.

This short overview highlights the challenges associated with creating an IO, as well as the potential trade-offs, between each country of 'going on its own' or aligning with other countries to speak 'with one voice' in global politics to increase the potential impact. A closer assessment of BRICS's internal development is required to assess the challenges BRICS is facing in transforming itself into a genuine IO.

BRICS as an international organisation: Assessing the challenges

So far, BRICS can be described as a loose cooperation of states, and transforming it into an IO to increase its impact on global politics would require considerable effort. Even so, the present state of facilitating cooperation among BRICS members should not be underestimated. Considering the above-mentioned characteristics of an IO, we may start



assessing the most fundamental one: What potential mutual benefits can be identified? While it seems at first quite simple to answer this question, it becomes more challenging when undertaking a closer evaluation of the annual statements produced. Certainly, from the very beginning, in all official statements, the mutual benefits of cooperation to support the demands of emerging countries have been emphasised. Specific issues to be addressed are the reform of existing international financial institutions and the formation of a multi-polar world order. As specified in the Yekaterinburg Statement (2009), recent changes in the global economy need to be recognised, consequently offering emerging economies a stronger voice and better representation within the existing global institutional setting. On a general level, it is stated that cooperation should serve the common interests of emerging powers. Equality, mutual support, and inclusiveness in support of its members and emerging powers are also stressed in the Goa Declaration (2016). Alike reads the Johannesburg II Declaration (2023, 1-2), declaring that the benefits of cooperation are based on three pillars: political and security; economic and financial; and cultural and people-to-people cooperation. It adds that enhancing and improving global governance, as well as increasing the representation of emerging powers in international organisations, represents another ongoing and primary task. The Kazan Declaration (2024) reiterates a commitment to the three-pillar cooperation, a more inclusive international financial architecture, and a multi-polar world order, so as to enhance the benefits and roles of emerging and developing states. Thus, one can argue that enhancing the members' global standing and participation in decision-making within the established global institutional setting can be identified as a primary mutual benefit target, which in turn could offer a basis for a deeper institutional development.

However, when we consider one of the alternative explanations for creating an IO, based on the interests of a dominant great power, BRICS seems unlikely to be a medium for any great power. While we can identify some potential regional great powers among the BRICS members, only China would qualify as a potential global great power. Yet neither has China signalled any willingness to take on, nor would the other members accept, a special role for China in usurping BRICS as an instrument of national power enhancement to dominate global politics. Nor is there any other member state that could do so. Thus, indicating that there needs to be existing great power interests in facilitating the development of an IO does not fit well with the cooperation dynamic observed within BRICS so far. Does this mean that BRICS will be the exception to the rule? Future developments will show.

Another, earlier mentioned, topic is building trust among independent political units. Has the current stage of its development already generated enough trust among its members to be a basis for further institutional development? A preliminary assessment would indicate that it has. An associated question is whether we can identify rules and norms as another source of enhanced cooperation and a basis for transforming BRICS from a loose cooperation of states into an IO. Equality, respect for national sovereignty, recognition of the role of emerging powers in global affairs, and support for the countries of the Global South could serve as indications of shared norms and rules. A resilient commitment to multilateralism - accompanied by a call for reforms to the existing global institutional setting and a focus on a multi-polar world order - can be added as another example of emerging norm-setting. The Yekaterinburg Statement (2009) delivers a



strong commitment to multilateral diplomacy, with the United Nations at its core, though efforts for creating a multi-polar world order are also mentioned. The Goa Declaration (2016, 2-3) restates those focuses by pointing out that BRICS envisages a transition to a multi-polar world order based on the central role of the United Nations but includes the comprehensive call for United Nations reforms, especially of the Security Council, to become more representative of the current distribution of economic power and to include more countries from the Global South in global decision-making. The Goa Declaration also re-emphasises solidarity, equality, and mutual understanding. The Johannesburg II Declaration (2023) reaffirms that sovereign equality, solidarity, consensus, and multilateralism are the guiding principles of the BRICS cooperation. It also confirms that the United Nations is the cornerstone of the international system, but upholds the earlier call for comprehensive reforms. The Kazan Summit Declaration (2024) reiterates the BRICS commitment to cooperation based on mutual respect, sovereign equality, solidarity, and consensus. It also restates its support for multilateralism and a multi-polar world order, as well as the continued recognition of the United Nations as the cornerstone of the international system, while the call for reform is also upheld.

Assessing the performance of IOs in general, Lall (2017, 276) identifies narrow national interests and opportunistic behaviour of its members as a primary obstacle, even when at first a demand for collective action exists, but this may change once an IO has been created, as countries may decide that a strategy of pushing national interests may be a more suitable approach. Considering BRICS' commitment to support the national interests of its members, aligning the national interests of its members becomes a critical challenge for deeper integration, which will increase with rising membership. However, creating a new institution to support the global standing of its members raises additional issues. For instance, if any of them are already members of other global or regional international organisations, how will this impact their behaviour with regard to specific goals as members of another organisation? In this regard, Papa (2015) points towards the impact of institutional density. For example, if country A is a member in organisations X, Y, and Z, the specific response it decides on with regard to one membership may also generate a knock-on effect as other members in one of the organisations start to question the extent of country A's commitment to that organisation and its goals, consequently undermining a critical aspect for every organisation: trust and, with it, predictability. BRICS has so far shown a commitment to cooperation with different regional organisations, outlined in the various annual statements assessed for this paper, permitting them to address regional issues by themselves, with a special emphasis on the African Union and its Agenda 2063. Nor is the African Union the only regional organisation BRICS focuses on; it has had some engagement with BIMSTEC leaders, as well. In addition, BRICS highly values the role of the G20 as a primary global forum for multilateral cooperation. As to whether this strong support for various regional organisations and global forums, such as the G20, and membership overlay will develop into a potential serious internal challenge for BRICS, only the future will show.

Nevertheless, when we consider where BRICS started, as the imagination of a financial investment manager with no political support, it already had some remarkable success in institutionalisation, based on its ability to organise regular annual heads of government summits, with individual statements generated and an ever-increasing field of



cooperation among its members. Those fields are quite varied: supporting agricultural development to enhance food security; establishment of a Digital Economy Working Group; a Centre for Industrial Competence to increase human resource development; support for infrastructure development; improving collective capacity for global pandemic prevention; a Young Scientist Forum and Youth Council; disaster management cooperation; people-to-people exchanges; and sporting events, just to name some of the additional cooperation mechanisms. While each of them addresses a specific theme, together they contribute to a rising visibility of BRICS among its members' decision-makers and people at the grassroots level, consequently increasing its profile and contributing to a process of deeper cooperation.

In considering that BRICS may decide on a deeper cooperation, to form an IO, to increase their recognition and influence in global politics and with the existing institutional global setting, a critical question is how to assess their demand for change. In analysing the various annual BRICS meeting statements, we can see that they also offer more clarity on the extent to which BRICS members are revisionist, i.e., aim to 'overthrow' the existing international order. The short answer is that they are not revisionists in the original meaning of the term, as they aim for adjustments within the existing global institutional setting, instead of overthrowing it. Indeed, there is a strong commitment to existing institutions, like the United Nations, the WB, the IMF, the WTO, and the WHO. While there is a strong appeal to adjust the inner workings of the existing global institutional setting to allow more participation of emerging powers and developing states in policy-making, there is no call for developing an alternative or parallel global institutional setting, nor for abolishing the existing global institutional setting. Instead, there are specific demands like for a strong global financial safety net founded on a quota-based and adequately resourced IMF; for a multilateral, rule-based, non-discriminatory trading system with the WTO at its centre; and an emphasis on the indispensable cornerstone of the United Nations in the international system, even while there are equally strong calls for United Nations reforms to enhance the presence and role of emerging powers and developing states. Therefore, based on these commitments to the established global institutional framework, describing BRICS as a source of revisionism, as a source of change *of* the international system, as opposed to change *within*, is grossly misleading, if not outright wrong. Indeed, in the context of recent developments, such as the United States' withdrawal from the WHO (whereas the BRICS members reiterate their full support for the WHO as the central IO in addressing global public health issues, including pandemic prevention), or in undermining the work and rule-based process of the WTO, it seems that it is the United States that has become the revisionist actor. Indeed, the unilateral trade policy the U.S. is obstinately pursuing only adds to this impression.

What future International System?

In considering whether BRICS can be an influential actor in global politics, the character of the international system is as relevant as its internal coherence. After all, we can observe an ongoing discussion that we are in the midst of another critical change of the international system, aligning the argument with the structural changes we witnessed in



the aftermath of the Second World War and the end of the Cold War, by referring to the increasing pressure the liberal international order and its global institutional setting has been facing to adapt to changing global developments, like the rise of emerging powers. This pressure increases with the readiness of the current United States government to undermine the global institutional setting through its policy strategies and related decisions it takes. The general assessment is that the existing global liberal order was created in the aftermath of the Second World War by the United States to support and enhance its new great-power position. However, Acharya (2017) and Ney (2017) remind us that its reach was never global, as during the Cold War period, the countries within the Soviet Bloc, as well as China, India, and Indonesia, were never part of it. Nonetheless, one could argue that the reach of the liberal international order expanded with the end of the Cold War as the underlying system conflicts (political/economic/social) decreased, giving the United States its hegemonic 'moment'. However, recent challenges based on emerging powers and a rising demand from the countries of the Global South to get stronger recognition of their interests within the existing global institutional setting have increased the challenge to the liberal international order and its basis. While it is accepted, especially for China and its Reform and Opening Process, that some rising powers did greatly profit from the established liberal international order, Acharya (2017, 276) points out that assuming that emerging powers would have the same stake in the liberal order as Western countries have would be a misperception. Ward (2017, 10-11), too, offers some insight into the complex relationship of rising powers with the existing liberal international order, stating that they should not be perceived as revisionists per se, but only to the extent that they become dissatisfied with the distribution of resources or the norms and rules governing the existing institutional setting supporting the international liberal order. In addition, and in an astonishing break with established policy, the policy of the current Trump presidency contributes to the undermining of the existing liberal international order. Indeed, it seems the United States has become the revisionist, even though the United States was once the primary sponsor of the existing global institutional setting.

Acknowledging that we are confronted with potential fundamental changes to the existing liberal international system does not offer much of an answer, but rather leads to more questions, in particular about the direction and nature of change. Indeed, when one tries to evaluate this topic, different positions can easily be identified, even though there is broad agreement that a change in the existing international liberal order will happen. Though the issue is, will it be a structural change *within* or even *of* an existing international system and to what extent the existing power constellation - unipolarity, bi-polarity, tri-polarity, or multipolarity - may undergo change. In one way or another, one of those constellations has been the foundation of every international system throughout history. Yet current propositions about the structural changes the existing international system will undergo argue that continuing to think about different forms of polarity may no longer be appropriate. Indeed, alternative conceptions of a future emerging international system, whether multiplex (Acharya 2017), polycentric (Cohen 2015), or multi-order (Flockhart 2016), support a perception of forthcoming structural change. Cohen (2015, 3) describes a polycentric international order as being built on three categories of states: first-order power, whose influence and capacities reach beyond



their own region; second-order power, major powers whose influence is limited to their region; and third-order powers, with either distinctive cultural or ideological capacities to influence their neighbours. However, he adds that geopolitical regions, a conglomerate of countries based on geographical proximity, political, cultural, and military interaction and shared historical experience, will be a crucial force in the shaping and radical restructuring of the international system. Regarding the prospect of a multi-order international system, Flockhart (2016) argues that there is compelling evidence that the international system is changing towards a multi-order system instead of multi-polar, as it will be composed of clusters of states with different cultural backgrounds and experience in their process of rising modernity, leading to a generation of different sets of norms underlying a multi-order international system. She also states that this represents a diffusion of power, which contrasts with the various characterisations of polarity we are familiar with. As for the conception of a multiplex international system, Acharya (2017, 277) claims that it will be based on the experience of multiple modernities, of interconnectedness and interdependence, representing a complex setting of crosscutting ideas, perceptions, and power constellations; as such, it will not be defined by a hegemon, a single country, or a single idea. In a more recent publication, Acharya, Estevadeordal, & Goodan (2023) identify four features of multiplexity: interaction capacity (the ability to influence the movement of ideas, goods, people, money, and military power across the system); deep interdependence beyond economic cooperation (such as environmental issues, governance, security, and connectivity); shared, multidimensional, and diverse world-order leadership; and clusters of layers of international cooperation based on or beyond geography-based interactions. Thus, a multiplex international system will be a plural, multi-centred, and multidimensional world where not a single power will dominate.

Conclusion

BRICS's ability to influence global politics is linked with its ability to manage internal contradictions and its ability to speak with one voice. Thus, institutional development could contribute to a stronger recognition of BRICS in global politics. When considering its origins, as a financial market imagination, it has already undergone a remarkable institutionalisation process based on annual meetings of heads of state, annual strategy documents, and a wide variety of cooperation mechanisms at the ministerial and societal levels. However, BRICS is still, and rightly, described as a loose state cooperation, and the critical question is: Can BRICS as an organisation deliver what its members are expecting from it, recognition of their interests, to enhance their decision-making power within the existing global institutional setting? In this regard, it is worth remembering that asymmetry of global economic and political influence and impact has been a major characteristic of BRICS members from their very beginning. Thus, facilitating deeper cooperation would be instrumental in addressing this challenge. Transforming the BRICS into an IO could offer a strategic response to increase its weight in global decision-making and within the existing global institutional setting. Transformation into an IO would require addressing a number of fundamental topics, as an IO requires some basic requirements. The most fundamental are the promise of mutual benefits, to generate



trust among its members, the establishment of rules and norms that every member has to follow, and hence the establishment of an institutional logic. Thus, can we identify benefits, rules and norms within the BRICS cooperation which could support its transformation towards an IO and a strong voice of its members at the global level? While we can identify some specific aspects informing BRICS cooperation, like assured equality, respect for national sovereignty, recognition of the role of emerging powers in global affairs, strong support for emerging powers and the countries of the Global South and a fundamental demand for reforming the existing global institutional setting, the question remains if those aspects can be already be identified as rules and norms and a source for transformation towards and IO. Whether such a transformation will ever be successful or even attempted is an open question, but without the influence of BRICS on global politics, the influence on instigating change within the existing global institutional setting will be rather limited. Even if successful, the most likely outcome of an institutionalisation process may lead to another ASEAN-style cooperation process, since a stronger internal integration of the different members, towards a supranational organisation, is rather out of the question.

References

- Acharya, A. (2017). After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 31(3), 271-285.
- Acharya, A., Estevadeordal, A., & Goodman, L. W. (2023). Multipolar or multiplex? Interaction capacity, global cooperation and world order. *International Affairs*, 99(6), 2339-2365.
- Goa Declaration. (2016) *8th BRICS Summit Goa Declaration 2016*. <http://www.brics.utoronto.ca/docs/161016-goa.pdf>
- Higgott, R. (2006). International Political Institutions. In R. A.W. Rhodes, S. A. Binder, & B. A. Rockman (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions* (pp. 611-632). Oxford Academic.
- Ikenberry, G.J. (2012). *The origins, crisis, and transformation of the American world order*. Princeton University Press.
- Ikenberry, G. J. (2014). Introduction: power, order, and change in world politics. In G. J. Ikenberry (Ed.), *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics* (pp.1-16). Cambridge University Press.
- Johannesburg II Declaration (2023) *XV BRICS Summit Johannesburg II Declaration BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Mutually Accelerated Growth, Sustainable Development and Inclusive Multilateralism*. Sandton, Gauteng, South Africa, Wednesday 23 August 2023. https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/CPV/Declaration_2408.pdf
- Kazan Declaration (2024) *XXI BRICS Summit Kazan Declaration Strengthening Multilateralism For Just Global Development And Security*. Kazan, Russian Federation, 23 October 2024. <https://dirco.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/XVI-BRICS-Summit-Kazan-Declaration-23-October-2024.pdf>



Kehoane, R. O. (1989). *International Institutions and State Power: Essays in International Relations Theory*. Westview Press.

Keohane, R. O. (1984). *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton University Press.

Lall, R. (2017). Beyond Institutional Design: Explaining the Performance of International Organisations. *International Organisation*, 71, Spring 2017, 245–280.

Lugg, A. (2024). Re-contracting intergovernmental organisations: Membership change and the creation of linked intergovernmental organisations. *The Review of International Organisations*, 19, 545–577

March, J. G. & Olson, J. P. (2006). Elaborating the “New Institutionalism in R. A.W. Rhodes, S. A. Binder, & B. A. Rockman (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions* (pp. 3-22). Oxford Academic.

Nuruzzaman, M. (2020). Why BRICS Is No Threat to the Post-war Liberal World Order. *International Studies*, 57(1), 51-66.

Nye, Joseph S (2017). Will the Liberal Order Survive? The History of an Idea. *Foreign Affairs*, 96(1), 10-16.

Papa, Mihaela (2015) Sustainable Global Governance? Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle Institutions. *Global Environmental Politics* 2015; 15 (4), 1–20.

Petrone, Francesco (2019). A Specter is Haunting the West: The BRICS and the Future of Global Governance. *The Rest*, 9(1), 20-32.

Roberts, C. (2015). *Are the BRICS building a non-Western concert of powers?*. <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/are-the-brics-building-non-western-concert-powers-13280?page%4show>

Stuenkel, O. (2016). The BRICS: Seeking Privileges by Constructing and Running Multilateral Institutions. *Global Summitry*, 2(1), 38–53.

van Noort, C. (2019). The Construction of Power in the Strategic Narratives of the BRICS. *Global Society*, 33(4), 462-478.

Ward, S. (2017). *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*. Cambridge University Press.

World Bank GDP annual growth rate % (2025)
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG>

World Bank GDP current US\$ (2025).
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>

Yekaterinburg Statement. (2009). *Joint Statement of the BRIC Countries’ Leaders* (Yekaterinburg, Russia, June 16, 2009). <https://infobrics.org/document/3/>

HYDRO-DIPLOMACY AS A STRATEGIC LEVER: COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS FROM INDIA AND CHINA IN REGIONAL COOPERATION AND GLOBAL WATER GOVERNANCE

PINTU KUMAR MAHLA

pin2choudhary.official@gmail.com

Research Associate, Water Resources Research Centre, University of Arizona, Tucson (USA). ORCID- <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8338-406X>

Abstract

Hydro-diplomacy has become a strategic tool for rising powers to balance regional cooperation and have an impact on global water governance. This paper compares India and China to see how they can use their shared water resources to improve their global standing and strengthen their regional alliances. India and China both have several concerns to deal with when it comes to the Brahmaputra River Basin, which is very important for stability and growth in the region. India uses hydro-diplomacy to build cooperative structures in South Asia, with a focus on fair water sharing and ways to settle disputes. On the other hand, China uses its position as an upstream riparian state to influence regional policies, often making its water strategies fit with its larger geopolitical goals. The use of the water events intensity scale and long-term water conflict forecast helps us better understand hydro-diplomacy as an important part of the foreign policy of rising powers. It also gives us ideas about how it could change regional dynamics and the way the world is governed.

Keywords

Multi-Track Hydro-Diplomacy, Transboundary Water Management, Regional Cooperation, Water Governance, Geo-politics.

Resumo

A hidrodiplomacia tornou-se uma ferramenta estratégica para as potências emergentes equilibrarem a cooperação regional e exercerem influência na governança global da água. Este artigo compara a Índia e a China para compreender como podem usar os seus recursos hídricos compartilhados, melhorar a sua posição global e fortalecer as suas alianças regionais. A Índia e a China têm várias preocupações quando se trata da bacia do rio Brahmaputra, que é muito importante para a estabilidade e o crescimento da região. A Índia utiliza a hidrodiplomacia para construir estruturas cooperativas no sul da Ásia com foco na partilha justa da água e meio de resolução de conflitos. Por outro lado, a China utiliza a sua posição como Estado ribeirinho a montante para influenciar as políticas regionais, muitas vezes fazendo com que as suas estratégias hídricas se coadunem com os seus objetivos geopolíticos mais amplos. O uso da escala de intensidade de eventos hídricos e da previsão de conflitos hídricos de longo prazo ajuda-nos a compreender melhor a hidrodiplomacia como uma parte importante da política externa das potências emergentes. Também oferece ideias sobre como poderia mudar a dinâmica regional e a forma como o mundo é governado.



Palavras-chave

Hidrodiplomacia Multifacetada, Gestão Transfronteiriça da Água, Cooperação Regional, Governança da Água, Geopolítica.

How to cite this article

Mahla, Pintu Kumar (2025). Hydro-Diplomacy as a Strategic Lever: Comparative Insights from India and China in Regional Cooperation and Global Water Governance. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 63-83. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.4>

Article submitted on 12th May 2025 and accepted for publication on 06th September 2025.





HYDRO-DIPLOMACY AS A STRATEGIC LEVER: COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS FROM INDIA AND CHINA IN REGIONAL COOPERATION AND GLOBAL WATER GOVERNANCE

PINTU KUMAR MAHLA

Introduction

The cooperation over transboundary hydro resources prevails in most instances. There has been a minor increase in water conflicts since 2000. These conflicts that do occur are of limited intensity and hardly ever involve violence (Transboundary Freshwater Diplomacy Database Project, n.d.). However, they are often related to their uneven distribution, upstream-downstream dynamics, competition, and securitisation. This context can lead to disagreements and conflicts while negatively impacting sustainable water resources management and the relations, peace and stability of any region.

Water conflicts invite several upstream and downstream nations to come together for cooperation. However, some countries do not find cooperation over hydro resources a suitable step concerning their national interests. China's unilateral actions over the Brahmaputra River basin are a great example among us. While the benefits of cooperation typically outweigh those of unilateral action, there might be various incentives to not engage in cooperation/pursue unilateral or conflictive behaviour. This behaviour can have long-term negative consequences on all riparians involved. Consequently, hydro-diplomacy addresses these conflict risks to prevent or limit negative repercussions and ensure cooperation and peace.

People often call water 'blue gold' because it is so important for life. It is also called a common resource, which means that it is meant for everyone to use and manage. Water is very versatile, which means it can be used in many different ways. But it also has a lot of potential to cause bad things to happen, both at the domestic and global levels. Water has been a source of conflict throughout history, causing fights at the local, regional, and international levels. The Brahmaputra water dispute between India and China is a prime example.

In the world of Himalayan hydro-politics, China and India are both important players. India, as a lower-middle riparian, is more vulnerable to water insecurity because it is more dependent on the Tibetan plateau's headwaters to keep rivers like the Indus, Sutlej, and Brahmaputra flowing. China, with its advantageous hydrological position, holds greater power to determine broader political relationships with its riparian neighbours. The lack of proper institutionalisation exacerbates existing challenges in the basin, which runs across a disputed border between two nuclear-armed countries engaged in tense



border interactions. China's focus on strategic infrastructure dominance is a bugbear for regional and global water governance. It can deteriorate the downstream nations' water scenario.

Both countries, India and China, have a limited 'Track 1' stance within the hydro diplomacy track mechanism. Track 1 is a form of formal inter-state diplomacy conducted by government officials in predefined settings. In the case of India and China, it involves only a few agreements and limited discussions about the Brahmaputra River basin. Neither country trusts the other because there are no effective ways to resolve disputes, prevent their occurrence, or collaborate more closely. This lack of trust hampers cooperation, making the region less stable and affecting the people living there. This study examines the effectiveness of India's collaborative approach versus China's assertive stance in managing transboundary waters through hydro-diplomatic strategies. This approach is generally less visible in the existing research. It also assesses how these approaches will give rise to water tensions in mitigating cross-border water issues. To assess the effectiveness of these approaches, the Basin at Risk Scale (Water Event Intensity Scale) framework has been employed. This framework places this study in another context, which is barely researched in contemporary transboundary water research. The findings deepen understanding of hydro-diplomacy as a key element of the foreign policy of emerging powers, offering insights into its ability to influence regional dynamics and shape global governance.

Research Methodology

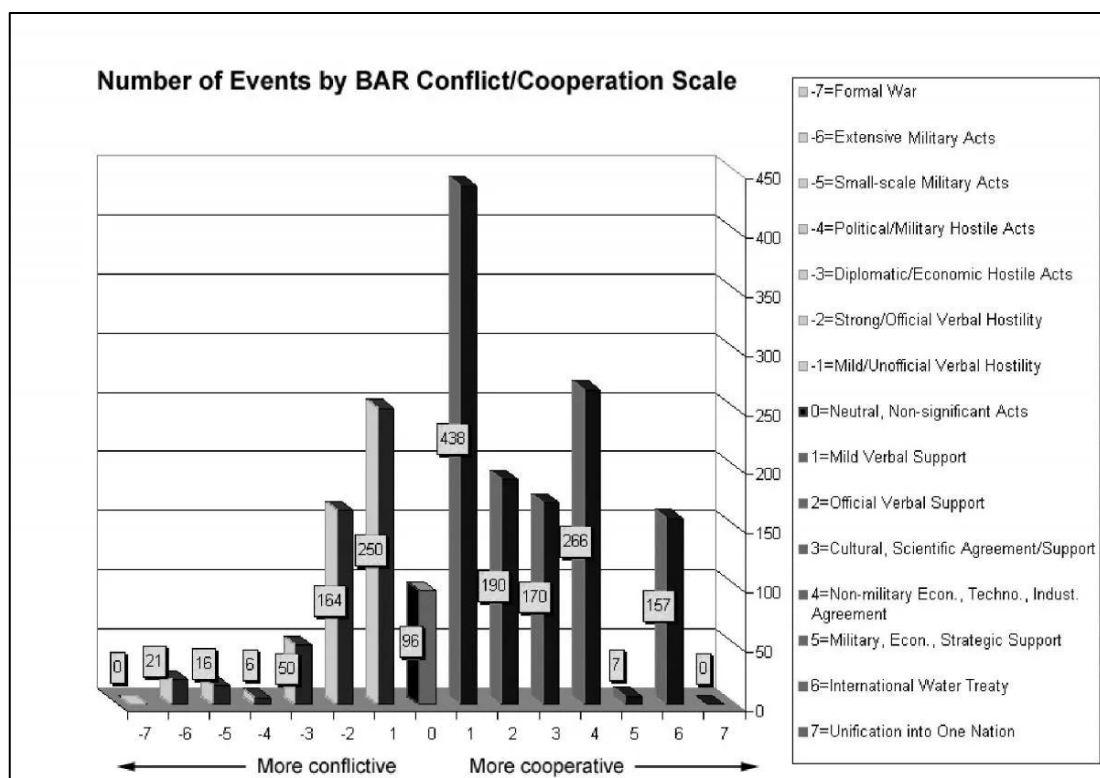
The study adopts the mixed-method approach, which consists of both qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative data relies on secondary data, which consists of rich literature on transboundary river cooperation. The quantitative data accompany the secondary data to examine or give legitimacy to the qualitative data. Quantitative data will be referred from the transboundary freshwater diplomacy database by Oregon State University, the water conflict chronology database by Pacific Institute, global tools by the Water, Peace and Security (WPS) partnership, government reports, policy documents, and international agreements (See the reference section for further exploration of databases). This research examines a comparative analysis of the hydro-diplomacy strategies of India and China on transboundary river basin conflicts and the cooperation framework. The comparative case study will be used to explore the roots of water conflicts, including geopolitical, economic, and environmental factors.

Moreover, this research has also employed the Basin at Risk Scale (Water Event Intensity Scale), a part of The Transboundary Freshwater Diplomacy Database developed by the Oregon State University, to identify historical indicators of international freshwater conflict and cooperation between India and China and, from them, create a framework to identify and evaluate international river basins at potential risk for future freshwater conflict (See Fig.1.). To do that, there are some indicators, population density, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), overall relations, water development projects, treaties or agreements, based on the qualitative judgement of statistical and empirical analyses in Transboundary Freshwater Diplomacy Database (Transboundary Freshwater Diplomacy Database). The purpose of using this scale was to identify these indicators of international



freshwater conflict and cooperation between India and China and, from them, create a framework to identify and evaluate transboundary river basins at potential risk for future freshwater conflict. Through this comprehensive approach, a nuanced understanding of the hydro-diplomacy framework as a critical aspect of emerging powers' foreign policy offers insights into its potential to reshape regional dynamics and influence the global governance landscape.

Fig. 1. Basin at Risk Scale (Water Event Intensity Scale)



Source: The Transboundary Freshwater Diplomacy Database, Oregon State University, USA

Theoretical Framework of Hydro-Diplomacy

Hydro-diplomacy is the process of discussing and resolving political issues that arise when countries have disagreements over water resources that cross borders. It involves establishing collaborative water governance frameworks using foreign policy tools integrated within bilateral and multilateral relations, which operate at various levels and through different channels. It also involves several diplomatic tracks to enhance transboundary river cooperation. These tracks highlight the diverse approaches used to manage and resolve conflicts. Track I diplomacy refers to formal, government-led negotiations that occur in official, pre-established settings, often representing the primary channel for state-to-state interactions. In contrast, Track II diplomacy involves informal and unofficial dialogues where state representatives or other adversarial groups engage in discussions without the constraints of formal negotiations, fostering open



communication and mutual understanding. Track I and a Half diplomacy bridges the gap between Tracks I and II, offering a semi-official platform where government officials interact with non-state actors such as scientists, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), or mediators, often facilitated by a third party. This track is particularly effective in generating innovative solutions and building trust. Lastly, Track III diplomacy is characterised by citizen-led initiatives and grassroots efforts, where NGOs, civil society organisations, and individuals engage in cross-border dialogues to promote peace, understanding, and collaboration. The synergy among these tracks, i.e., multi-track hydro-diplomacy, is very necessary to support the overall diplomatic process. It provides several platforms for conflict resolution and cooperative engagements.

While formulating robust hydro-diplomacy, it is worth adopting several hydro-diplomacy tools and approaches such as dispute prevention, dispute resolution, reconciliation of interests, agreements, negotiation and an enlarging basket of benefits. Besides these approaches, the geopolitical significance of water invites the first and foremost consideration of the policy framework. Most scholars have traditionally understood geopolitics within the context of territorial disputes. Imperialist geopolitics is linked to scholars like Alfred Mahan, Friedrich Ratzel, Halford Mackinder, Karl Haushofer, and Nicholas Spykman, who stressed the importance of controlling land and sea power strategically. During the Cold War, scholars like George Kennan and leaders from both the West and the Soviet Union used the language of containment, First/Second/Third World hierarchies, and the binary of Western vs. Eastern blocs to shape geopolitics. During this time, there was competition between ideas and strategic alignment. After the Cold War ended, a new kind of geopolitics called the New World Order began. It was led by scholars like Mikhail Gorbachev, Francis Fukuyama, Edward Luttwak, George Bush, and groups like the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Some of the most important ideas were new ways of thinking about politics, the end of history, neo-liberalism, rogue states, and Huntington's Clash of Civilisations. Finally, Environmental Geopolitics puts global ecological issues at the centre of its work, with contributions from Al Gore, Robert Kaplan, Thomas Homer-Dixon, and Michael Renner. The lexicon has begun to conceptualise geopolitics within an environmental framework. Gore has been particularly active in advocating for environmental initiatives, while Homer-Dixon and Renner have focused on the concept of environmental scarcity (See Table 1). This highlights the fact that environmental issues, especially water issues, can play a central role in geopolitics. In this context, there is a direct correlation between hydro-political and geopolitical conflicts, as excessive water resource consumption leads to scarcity and impacts the environment, ultimately giving rise to geopolitical tensions. By conceptualising water as both an environmental and developmental resource, as well as a strategic and security asset, the geopolitical lens shows how countries use water as a tool for diplomacy, coercion, or leverage, and how water conflicts can either cause bigger problems or bring people together. Geopolitics deals with hydro-politics by looking at water as a way to get power, a security issue, and a way to talk to other countries. It sees the risks (ecological crisis) and chances (cooperation, treaties, shared infrastructure) that come from having water resources that everyone can use.

**Table 1.** The Discourse on Geopolitics

Discourse	Key Intellectuals	Dominant Lexicon
Imperialist geopolitics	Alfred Mahan Friedrich Ratzel Halford Mackinder Karl Haushofer Nicholas Spykman	Seapower Lebensraum Landpower/Heartland Landpower/Heartland Rimlands
Cold War geopolitics	George Kennan Soviet and Western political and military leaders	Containment First/Second/Third World countries as satellites and dominoes Western vs. Eastern bloc
New world order geopolitics	Mikhail Gorbachev Francis Fukuyama Edward Luttwak George Bush Leaders of G7, IMF, WTO Strategic planners in the Pentagon and NATO Samuel Huntington	New Political Thinking The end of history Statist geo- economics US-led new world order, Transnational liberalism/Neo-liberalism Rogue states, nuclear outlaws and terrorists Clash of Civilisations
Environmental geopolitics	World Commission on Environment and Development Al Gore Robert Kaplan Thomas Homer-Dixon Michael Renner	Sustainable development Strategic environmental initiative Coming Anarchy Environmental scarcity Environmental scarcity

Source: O'Tuathail (1998)

Water is an environmental resource that has gained significant geopolitical importance due to its scarcity and commonality across international borders. It can be inferred from the words of Lao-Tsu, a 6th-century Chinese philosopher and founder of Taoism, that "in the world, there is nothing more submissive and weaker than water. Yet for attacking that which is hard and strong, nothing can surpass it" (Sinha, 2005).

Disputes regarding water resources have evolved into a progressively challenging issue to address, especially in a multipolar world where water is regarded as a source of economic and political influence. The inequitable allocation of water resources, in conjunction with population growth and development, may result in water scarcity, potentially inciting violent conflict (Burgess et al., 2016). To deal with and settle these water disputes, there have been many bilateral and multilateral efforts, such as dialogues, treaties, and joint commissions.

In South Asia, groups like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Indus Basin Initiative have given people a place to talk and work together on water issues. These groups have made it easier for South Asian countries to work together. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) is also actively engaged in enhancing water security and resilience in the Himalayan region through its support for inclusive, resilient,



sustainable, and well-governed service delivery and resource management. ADB extends its assistance to its developing member countries in attaining water-related Sustainable Development Goals, which encompass climate change resilience, access to fundamental water and sanitation services, heightened food security, rural revitalisation, gender equality, improved health, and a healthier environment (Asian Development Bank, N.d.). Moreover, the Himalayan University Consortium (HUC) Thematic Working Group on Water (Water Group), a thematic working group within the HUC, serves as an illustrative instance of a regional initiative endeavouring to foster enhanced collaboration and cooperation between research institutes and practice-based organisations (Himalayan University Consortium, N.d.). The primary objective of this initiative is to promote evidence-informed water resources management within the Himalayan region.

However, no transboundary water cooperation institution has materialised thus far. In October 2020, representatives from all eight countries within the Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) region signed a declaration during the Ministerial Mountain Summit (Sprouse, 2022). The declaration called for increased deliberation on emerging issues in the HKH, a unified regional representation in global forums, the establishment of a science-policy forum concentrating on mountain environments, and the formation of a Task Force to evaluate the feasibility of establishing a regional institutional mechanism. The impetus behind the summit arose from a 2019 evaluation that projected a complete collapse in water availability to downstream regions of the Tibetan Plateau by the end of this century under a 'business as usual' scenario (Ibid.). Moreover, Glaciers in the HKH region are vanishing rapidly, "with a 65% increase in the melting rate from 2011 to 2020 compared to the previous decade. Their melt rate surpasses the global average, with the eastern HKH experiencing the most substantial losses. Projections suggest that if global temperatures rise by 1.5–2°C, the region's glacier volume could decline by 30–50% by 2100. In scenarios where warming exceeds 2°C, glacier volume may decrease to 20–45% of its 2020 level" (UNESCO, 2025). With escalating atmospheric temperatures causing the ongoing melting of glaciers and other frozen water sources across the HKH, which directly sustain the lives of nearly two billion individuals, the window of opportunity for creating an effective water resource management system in South Asia is rapidly closing.

South Asia, especially the Himalayan region, is known around the world for having a lot of resources and is home to more than a million people. Most people in the area live in rural areas and get most of their food from farming and small-scale subsistence farming. The Himalayan region is one of the most vulnerable places to climate change because of several factors, including a growing population, the depletion of natural resources, and climate change caused by humans. The rise in temperatures and the growing carbon footprints are two clear signs of climate change in this area. Both of these things are good signs of how the climate is changing in the Himalayan region. It is easy to see how climate change is affecting the region's water resources around the world. This phenomenon has had a significant negative impact on the region's main river basins, especially the Indus and Brahmaputra basins.

The region, South Asia, is known for its water-related disputes. For example, the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty between India and Pakistan. In addition to the competition over the Indus Basin, China's strategic hydrological involvement in South Asian hydro-politics



regarding the Brahmaputra is also concerning. In this context, the hydro-politics of South Asia calls for an examination of the hydro-diplomacy strategies employed by both India and China.

India's Approach to Hydro-Diplomacy

India's hydro-political interests in South Asia have undergone significant changes and become increasingly complex over the years. India's water management plans, hydroelectric power generation, and efforts to collaborate in the region are all significantly influenced by the Himalayas, which have extensive large river systems. The Indus River Basin, the Brahmaputra River Basin, and the Ganges River are all important sources of water for India's agriculture, industry, and homes. India has made building dams and reservoirs a top priority so that it can control the flow of water, provide irrigation, and generate hydroelectric power. India is trying to use its water resources for sustainable growth through projects like the Kisenganga hydroelectric dam on the Jhelum River, the Nathpa Jhakri Dam on the Sutlej River, and the proposed Dibang Multipurpose Project on the Brahmaputra River (NHPC, N.d).

However, India's hydro-diplomacy in South Asia faces challenges. The transboundary water disputes are a major concern, especially with China and Pakistan. To address these issues, India manages its transboundary waters through the IWT and Expert-level Mechanism (ELM) in the case of China (Department of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation, n.d.). India's hydro-political growth in the region has also raised awareness of environmental issues and the impact of large infrastructure projects on river ecosystems. Building dams and reservoirs alters river flow, damages aquatic biodiversity, and disrupts downstream ecosystems (He et al., 2024). Hydropower development also involves problems such as sedimentation, water pollution, and displacement of people (Liu et al., 2013). India recognises the need to balance energy requirements with environmental sustainability to tackle these challenges. It has taken measures to reduce the negative effects of dams through environmental impact assessments, the construction of fish migration systems, and afforestation.

Table 2. The Case of Hydro-diplomacy over the Indus Basin and Brahmaputra Basin

Aspect & Approaches	Indus River Basin	Brahmaputra River Basin
Riparian Countries	India, Pakistan	India, China, Bangladesh, Bhutan
Main Agreement	Indus Waters Treaty (1960)	No formal treaty; bilateral agreements with China
Mediator	World Bank	No third-party mediation
Water Sharing	India controls 3 eastern rivers (Sutlej, Beas, Ravi); Pakistan controls 3 western rivers (Indus, Jhelum, Chenab)	No comprehensive water-sharing agreement, but data-sharing mechanisms exist.



Conflict Management	Permanent Indus Commission (PIC) and Neutral Expert for dispute resolution	Periodic bilateral talks and technical exchanges
Infrastructure Projects	India constructs hydro projects within treaty guidelines	China's dam constructions on the upper Brahmaputra raise concerns in India
Legal Framework	Legally binding treaty with robust dispute resolution mechanisms	Bilateral agreements and diplomatic engagement, like the Expert-Level Mechanism, but no enforceable treaty
Recent Developments	Periodic disputes over Indian dam projects (e.g., Kishanganga, Ratle)	Concerns over China's proposed dams on the Yarlung Tsangpo (upper Brahmaputra)
Diplomatic Leverage	The treaty provides a limited scope for renegotiation, maintaining stability.	India relies on diplomatic channels and regional influence.
Environmental Concerns	Focuses on water allocation, with limited environmental considerations	Growing concerns over the ecological impact of Chinese projects
Future Outlook	Pressure to renegotiate due to changing hydrological patterns	Need for comprehensive multilateral dialogue on water management

Source: The Table prepared by the Author

Moreover, India and China's hydro-diplomatic approach to the Indus and Brahmaputra River basins reflects their strategic and geopolitical concerns, respectively (See Table 2). Even though there are political tensions, the IWT has mostly held up. India has followed treaty rules and used its legitimate water share. On the other hand, the Brahmaputra River Basin does not have a full-fledged treaty. India's hydro-diplomatic efforts in the Brahmaputra basin depend on bilateral talks and cooperation in the region because of the lack of a binding legal framework. The Brahmaputra basin needs more multilateral cooperation to deal with new problems. Environmental issues and climate change make both river basins even more difficult to deal with.

Consequently, India's hydro-diplomacy in the area is a complex and changing situation. To deal with the problems and opportunities that the Himalayan rivers bring, as well as to make sure that everyone has equitable use of water and to build good relationships with neighbouring countries in the name of shared prosperity, regional cooperation, and sustainable development, will continue to be very important.

China's Approach to Hydro-Diplomacy

China's interest in the Himalayan region (especially the Tibet Autonomous Region) stems from several factors. First and foremost, the Tibetan Plateau, commonly referred to as the 'Third Pole,' harbours a significant amount of freshwater. Numerous major rivers in Asia, such as the Yangtze, Indus, Brahmaputra, and Sutlej, originate from this plateau. It is estimated that "Tibet contributes approximately 627 Cubic kilometres of hydrological



flows annually, accounting for approximately 6 per cent of Asia's total runoff. The availability of freshwater in Tibet is approximately 104,500 Cubic meters per year, positioning Tibet as the world's fourth-largest reservoir of freshwater after Iceland, New Zealand, and Canada, which makes it the water tower of Asia" (Sinha, 2016). The watersheds of these rivers, which have their sources in Tibet, play a crucial role in providing water resources to South Asia. It plays a crucial role in sustaining the livelihoods of millions of people downstream. Recognising the economic and geopolitical advantages of controlling water resources, China has pursued hydropower projects in the region to meet its growing energy demands and enhance its national security.

In China, water resources are characterised by seasonal and regional imbalances, with floods common in summer and droughts in winter. The South experiences water abundance, while the North faces shortages. This uneven distribution leads to frequent flooding and drought disasters. It has been noted that "despite hosting 46% of the national population, 63% of the arable land, and generating 39% of the GDP, North China has only 18% of the country's water resources and 40% of the national per capita water availability" (Ministry of Water Resources China, 2023). This disparity between resource availability and demand has long posed challenges to sustainable development and regional stability. Moreover, China's limited water resources are further underscored by its "per capita water availability of 2,000 m³, merely 35% of the global average" (Ministry of Water Resources China, 2023). Regions such as the Yellow River basin, the Hai River basin, and Northwest China face particularly acute water scarcity (Ministry of Water Resources China, 2023). With economic growth and social progress driving increased water demands, the country's modernisation efforts are confronted with significant water resource constraints.

To address these challenges, China has pursued large-scale hydropower and water management projects, reflecting its hydro-political strategy (Ministry of Water Resources, China, n.d.). Significant investments have been made in constructing massive dams, including the Three Gorges Dam and the South-to-North Water Diversion Project, as well as several projects on the Brahmaputra River (International Commission on Large Dams, n.d.). These initiatives aim to balance water distribution across regions through extensive inter-basin and cross-regional water transfers. Currently, there are "129 major water diversion projects operational, effectively redistributing water to align with population centres and economic zones. The South-to-North Water Diversion Project stands as a prime example of this effort (See Fig.2). Its first phase on the Eastern and Middle routes has transferred 65.4 billion m³ of water, benefitting 176 million people. Between 2012 and 2022, China's total water supply capacity increased from 700 billion m³ to nearly 900 billion m³" (Ministry of Water Resources China, 2023).



Fig. 2. Roadmap of the South-To-North Water Diversion Project



Source: Ministry of Water Resources, China (2019, March 20)

Furthermore, rural water supply projects have provided “870 million rural residents with access to clean water, achieving 87% tap water coverage in rural areas” (Ibid.). These water management efforts grant China greater control over water flow, enhancing its influence over downstream regions. By regulating river systems, China strengthens its hydro-political presence in the region, impacting neighbouring riparian states like India. This combination of domestic water management and strategic resource control underscores the critical role of water in China’s long-term economic and geopolitical objectives.

In addition, China’s hydro-political development in the region is closely tied to its involvement in regional infrastructure initiatives. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) encompasses numerous hydropower and water infrastructure projects, including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which involves the construction of hydropower plants in the Indus River Basin. These efforts enhance China’s economic presence and influence in the region.

President Xi Jinping has emphasised the importance of prioritising water conservation, advocating for a comprehensive approach that includes raising awareness, implementing conservation measures, and promoting water-efficient practices across agriculture, industry, and urban areas. In line with this vision, China has pursued a national water-saving strategy, enforced the National Action Plan for Water Conservation and improved policies and systems to encourage responsible water use. As a result, from 2013 to 2022, “the country’s GDP expanded by 69.7%, while its total water consumption remained stable at around 610 billion cubic meters. Water use per 10,000 yuan of GDP and industrial-added value decreased by 42.8% and 58.2%, respectively. Additionally, the effective irrigation water use coefficient rose from 0.523 to 0.572” (Ministry of Water



Resources China, 2023). These efforts have transformed China's water management from an inefficient model to one that is intensive and efficient. It is worth to note here "despite possessing only 6% of the world's freshwater resources, China provides water for nearly 20% of the global population and contributes over 18% to the world's economy" (Ministry of Water Resources China, 2023). To enhance water governance, the Chinese government has introduced comprehensive plans like the Program of Action for the Construction of the National Water Network and the 14th Five-Year Plan for Safeguarding Water Security. Digital technologies are also being integrated into water management, with developments in digital twin basins, water networks, and projects. Advanced monitoring systems using meteorological satellites, rain-measuring radars, and hydrological stations further bolster China's water management capabilities (Ibid.).

Recognising the global challenges posed by water security, including water hazards, resource scarcity, ecological degradation, and pollution, China is advocating for international collaboration. This vision aims to support the achievement of the water-related goals outlined in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Ministry of Water Resources China, 2023).

Comparative Analysis: India vs China in Hydro-Diplomacy

In the case of China and India, water plays a significant role as a catalyst for territorial disputes, as abundant water resources within a contested territory often escalate tensions between the nations involved in the dispute. India's border dispute with China is a hydro-political. These disputes also include the concern of Tibet. Although China has full political control over Tibet, the headwaters of the region are transboundary. The competition over hydro resources leads to issues that can never be settled because Water relations cannot be permanent because stream flows are not constant. As argued by Uttam Sinha, "Political relations can easily be impacted by changes in the quantitative and qualitative nature of the river. Varied interpretations of the use of river water have resulted in claims and counter-claims" (Sinha, 2014). The hydro relations between India and China are currently in a nascent stage, presenting a wider opportunity for establishing cooperation and fostering the exchange of hydro resources at the scientific and societal levels. The history of water treaties, agreements, and institutions between the two nations spans a considerable period. In the case of the Brahmaputra River, there is no formal treaty per se, but concerning sharing and utilisation, both countries are committed to exchanging information for flood control purposes, data sharing, and transmission through the Expert-Level Mechanism (ELM).

Regarding the Indo-China River basins, an expert-level mechanism, consisting of representatives from both sides, was established in 2006 to discuss cooperation on various matters such as the provision of hydrological data during the flood season, emergency management, and other pertinent issues on an annual basis. The inaugural meeting took place in 2007. In terms of sharing and utilisation, both countries have agreed to exchange data for flood control, emergency management, and other related concerns.



However, comprehensive assessments regarding the extent of cooperation are still pending. Given their hydrological position and dependence on the Himalayan streams, China and India are important players in the hydro-politics of the region. It is clearly evident that "the leadership in both countries has, from time to time, acknowledged the water problem as an existential threat. Back in 1998, Deputy Prime Minister Wen Jiabao expressed concern that the 'very survival of the Chinese nation' is threatened by the looming water shortage. In his first Independence Day address in 2004, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh highlighted the issue of water and raised it as one of the '*Saat Sutras*' (seven sectors) needing attention" (Sinha, 2016).

Consequently, China, as a complete Upper-riparian, is an important player in the hydro-politics of South Asia. However, India, a significant participant in the realm of hydro-politics, assumes the role of a lower riparian in the case of the Brahmaputra basin. India's position as a lower riparian increases its reliance on the upstream sources of rivers, including the Brahmaputra, which originates from the Tibetan plateau (See Fig.). This dependency amplifies India's water insecurity, as its access to water resources is directly linked to the origins of these rivers. On the other hand, China's insecurity stems from the uneven distribution of hydro resources within its territory rather than external dependencies. Consequently, "China's hydrological position gives it a higher advantage in dealing with larger political equations with its riparian neighbours. India, on the other hand, given its middle riparian position and its longstanding commitment to bilateral river treaties, has to assiduously balance the anxiety and concerns of its lower riparians without compromising its water requirements" (Sinha, 2016). Several key concerns, including dam construction, flood control, joint management, and water quantity issues, emphasise the need for cooperation. The Basin at Risk Scale indicates an increasing conflict intensity, forecasting an emerging long-term conflict in the Brahmaputra basin.

Based on the Basin at Risk Scale, certain indicators (see methodology section) need to be considered to identify waters at risk for future conflicts over hydro resources. Firstly, basin countries with greater differences in their population densities tend to cooperate more over shared freshwater resources. India, with 492 people per square kilometre, and China, with 151 people per square kilometre, show a significant difference in population density (Worldometer, 2025). Basins between both countries, in particular, have a high population density, such as 18 inhabitants/km² in China and 432 inhabitants/km² in India (Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2011), which is an indicator of a basin at high risk of conflict. However, this challenge will be a common point of cooperation on the proper utilisation of water resources amid a growing population. Secondly, while the difference in their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) appears large and seems risky at the current stage (WorldData.info, N.d.), their overall relations are more conflictual. Globally, countries with generally friendly relations tend to cooperate over hydro resources. However, regionally, there is a weaker correlation. In South Asia, India and China have not maintained amicable hydro relations because of some past upheavals on certain national border issues (Mahla, 2024).

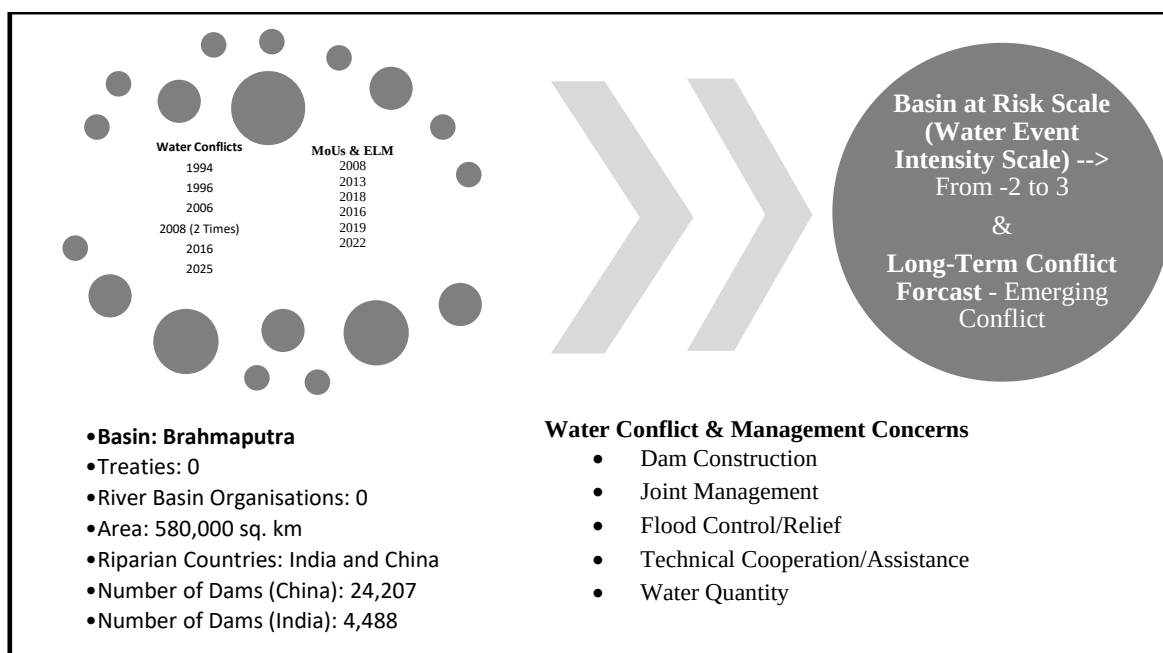
Lastly, on an infrastructure level, basins with a high dam density and treaties demonstrate significantly higher levels of cooperation than those without treaties. However, this is not the case with India and China, which do not have a strong agreement to address concerns related to water infrastructure in the Brahmaputra basin, which is a



high-dam-density basin. Therefore, considering all these factors, it is probable that there will be a risk in the basin shared between India and China. Moreover, there are a lot of instances where water conflicts or triggers have been the cause and result of the border skirmishes between India and China (Ibid.) In addition, according to the Basin at Risk Scale (Water Event Intensity Scale), water events related to conflict between India and China cover the scale from -2 to 3 (see Fig.1, Fig.3, Transboundary Freshwater Diplomacy Database, and Water Conflicts Database). This result shows the growing water conflict issues between the two countries. The risk scale showcases the more conflictive nature between India and China.

China may employ water as a means to exert pressure or as a political bargaining chip against India to secure concessions on the boundary issue. Given the backdrop of Sino-Indian relations, marked by territorial disputes, entrenched mistrust, border tensions, and geopolitical rivalry, water emerges as a crucial factor that will significantly influence the prospects of peaceful coexistence, cooperation, and competition between the two countries regarding the utilisation of the vital rivers originating from the Tibetan region, which are essential for sustaining life.

Fig. 3. Long-Term Conflict Forecast (The Brahmaputra River Basin)



Source: The Figure was prepared by the Author by retrieving data from the International Commission on Large Dams, the transboundary freshwater diplomacy database by Oregon State University, the water conflict chronology database by the Pacific Institute, and global tools by the Water, Peace, and Security (WPS) partnership.

Given its status as an Upper-riparian state, China may potentially seek to coordinate and challenge the water-related discussions between Pakistan and Bangladesh in conjunction with India, while refraining from explicitly disclosing its hydroelectric projects on the



Indus Basin and Brahmaputra Basin. The growing nexus between China and Pakistan is also a significant cause for concern for India. "Pakistan had been under the strategic and economic tutelage of the United States for more than fifty years, enjoying an unprecedented economic boom in the form of free aid from the United States, which had been interrupted after the notorious Al-Qaeda leader bin Laden's killing by US commandos. Pakistan quite cleverly opened up to China once the era of bonhomie was over with the United States. The surrogate, Pakistan, of the United States has now turned to step up being a surrogate of China" (Panigrahi, 2018).

Hydro-political Nexus between China and Pakistan

China's engagement in Pakistan's hydropower sector commenced in 2006 with the initiation of the first Pakistan-China Energy Forum in Islamabad. The forum focused on discussions about energy security and explored various energy sources, including hydro, thermal, and nuclear power. It also delved into the exploration of potential avenues for public-private partnerships and Chinese investments in Pakistan's energy sector (Kumar, 2007).

During President Hu Jintao's visit to Islamabad in November 2006, a joint statement was signed, reaffirming the shared commitment of both countries' leadership to strengthen their cooperation. The agreement encompassed the implementation of projects in the energy sector, encompassing hydropower, nuclear power, renewable energy sources, as well as the mining and resources sector (Pakistan Embassy Beijing, 2006). President Hu Jintao specifically emphasised the achievement of a consensus on collaborative efforts in hydroelectric power and the pursuit of "new sources of energy" (Kumar, 2007). As China rises, its axis with Pakistan will have a greater reach in the Himalayan region. It makes India's water vulnerable to two hostile regional neighbours: Pakistan and China. Moreover, the Increasing nexus between China and Pakistan, in the future, can hamper the hydro-diplomacy between India and China (Mahla, 2025).

Policy Recommendations and Future Directions

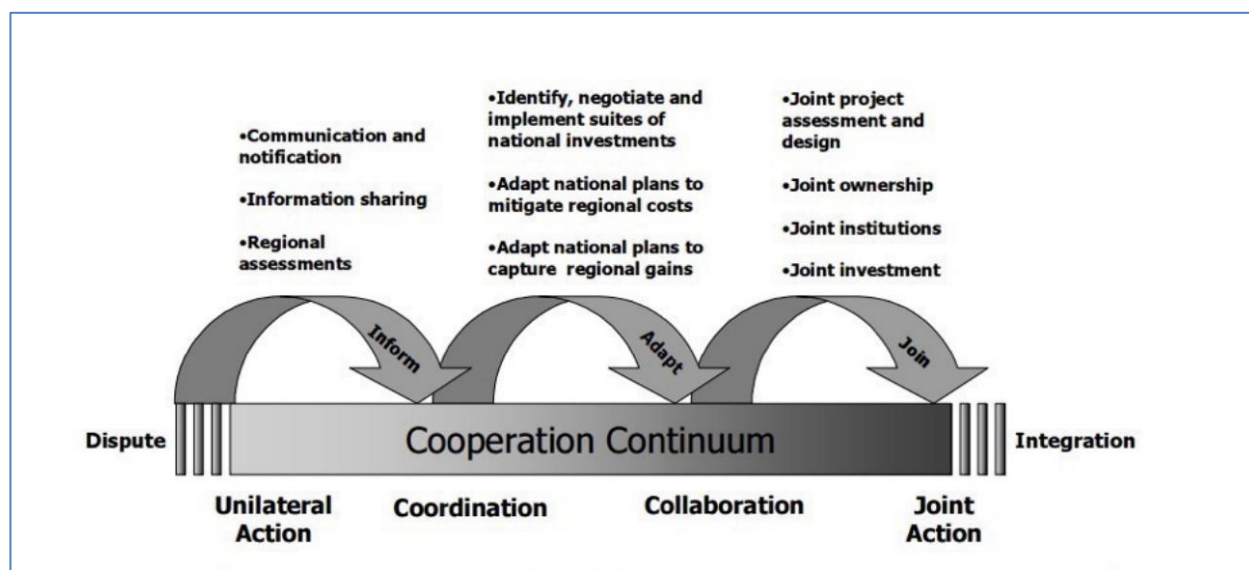
With mounting environmental pressures and political tensions in the Himalayan region, the urgency of achieving tangible advancements in multilateral water-sharing cooperation cannot be overstated. As competition for water access intensifies in the coming decades, the risk of mass migration, civil conflicts, and potentially violent confrontations between state actors may rise. In light of the current momentum, Himalayan countries must expedite the development of joint action or institutional arrangements that facilitate cooperation, thereby addressing the collective action challenges and diverse interests they face. Using Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) methods can help make water management more sustainable and collaborative. IWRM encourages cooperation among different groups by recognising how social, economic, and environmental factors are all connected. It also promotes fair distribution, efficient use, and conservation of water resources. As more and more mechanisms and initiatives come up to deal with shared water resources and related issues in South Asia, these efforts must promote inclusion and responsiveness to water



demand and access (Patra, 2018). These kinds of efforts should be based on strong evidence that includes an understanding of why they are needed, what they involve, and what the risks are. This evidence-based foundation is essential for mobilising sustained political commitment from various stakeholders, like non-state actors, over the long term. Presenting potential synergies, trade-offs, and a compelling business case is of utmost importance to empower stakeholders with the necessary information to make informed decisions regarding cooperation.

Cooperation initiatives often falter or have short lifespans when rushed or approached with a one-size-fits-all mentality that fails to adequately grasp the motives, priorities, and interests of stakeholders. Partnerships should be at the heart of shared water projects, making sure that important stakeholders and actors are involved in a meaningful way. There is a range of cooperation that goes from unilateral action (independent, non-transparent national plans) to coordination (communication and information about national plans) to collaboration (changing national plans for the benefit of both sides) to joint action (joint plans, management, or investment) (See Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Types of Cooperation- The Cooperative Continuum



Source: Sadoff and Grey (2005)

In this context, the case of the Brahmaputra Basin showcases China's unilateral assertive actions over the Brahmaputra River. Taking unilateral action within a river basin implies a complete absence of collaboration. There is no sharing of information, communication, or joint planning regarding the use and management of the shared water resources. This lack of cooperation not only eliminates the potential for mutual benefits but also creates a risk that the development and investment plans of neighbouring countries may interfere with or harm one another. Over time, these uncoordinated efforts can collectively reduce water availability or deteriorate water quality to such an extent that they jeopardise all ongoing and future initiatives. Therefore, the cooperation continuum between India and



China should reach the joint action stage. Joint action takes place when countries sharing a river work collaboratively as partners in planning, funding, and carrying out projects related to the development of international rivers. Such a high degree of cooperation typically requires formal agreements, such as treaties, to be established. However, China has no formal treaty over the Brahmaputra River with India. It is the contemporary demand of the South Asian region to have a formal treaty over the Brahmaputra River. Multiple factors give rise to geopolitical concerns between India and China (Huntjens et al., 2016). These factors have a great impact on the transboundary river cooperation between India and China. Water has played a significant role in geopolitical tensions, especially in the context of India-China border conflicts. Following the 73-day military standoff at Doklam in 2017, reports emerged suggesting that China had suspended the sharing of crucial hydrological information regarding the Brahmaputra and Sutlej rivers. This move was seen as a breach of their existing bilateral agreement and was linked to subsequent flooding in Assam and Uttar Pradesh (Mahla, 2024).

Hydropower is a crucial source of clean and renewable energy in the Himalayan region. However, the development, management, and utilisation of hydro resources requires extensive cooperation and coordination among nations. To fulfil this cooperative agenda, multiple concerns need multi-track diplomacy. The dispute over the Brahmaputra River needs multi-track water diplomacy, i.e., a multifaceted strategic leverage that involves various levels of diplomatic tracks and actors to mitigate concerns over transboundary river basins.

Conclusion

Transboundary water resources come with several challenges due to water transcending national boundaries. These challenges can lead to disagreements over the use, development or protection of water and lead to conflict. However, as per the Basin at Risk scale, emerging water conflicts in South Asia are typically limited and mostly non-violent. To always ensure the prevalence of cooperation and mitigate the possibility of water conflicts, the cooperative hydro-diplomacy continuum between India and China is very significant. Both countries face significant challenges in managing transboundary rivers, such as the Brahmaputra and Indus, which are critical for regional stability and development. India employs hydro-diplomacy to foster cooperative frameworks within South Asia, focusing on equitable water sharing and conflict resolution mechanisms. Conversely, China utilises its dominant position as an upstream riparian state to shape regional policies, often aligning its water strategies with broader geopolitical objectives. Regional and bilateral institutions, an omitted hydro-political strategy between India and China, play a significant role in addressing the complex challenges associated with the development, management, and utilisation of hydropower resources. By promoting multi-track hydro-diplomacy, these institutions can pave the way for a more efficient, equitable, and sustainable hydro sector development in the Himalayan region. The establishment and strengthening of robust institutions, especially and solely focusing on the hydro-politics in the Himalayan region, are imperative for harnessing the full potential of hydropower and advancing the transition to a clean and renewable energy future.



References

Asian Development Bank. (N.d.). *Water*. Available at <https://www.adb.org/what-we-do/topics/water>.

Burgess, J Peter, Owen, Taylor & Sinha, Uttam Kumar. (2016). Human securitisation of water? A case study of the Indus Waters Basin. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 29:2, 382-407. DOI: 10.1080/09557571.2013.799739.

Department of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation. (N.d.). *International Cooperation*. Ministry of Jal Shakti, India. Available at <https://jalshakti-dowr.gov.in/>.

Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). (2011). *Transboundary River Basin Overview – Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna*. United Nations. Available at <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/0b663060-87be-4338-9248-58cb9a2bfd8a/content>.

He, F., Zarfl, C., Tockner, K., Olden, J. D., Campos, Z., Muniz, F., ... & Jähnig, S. C. (2024). Hydropower impacts on riverine biodiversity. *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment*, 5(11), 755-772.

Himalayan University Consortium (HUC). (N.d.). *HUC Thematic Working Groups (TWGs)*. ICIMOD. Available at <https://www.icimod.org/huc/twg/>.

Huntjens, P., Yasuda, Y., Swain, A., De Man, R., Magsig, B., Islam, S. (2016). The Multi-track Water Diplomacy Framework: A Legal and Political Economy Analysis for Advancing Cooperation over Shared Waters. The Hague Institute for Global Justice. Available at https://siwi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/thigj_the-multi-track-water-diplomacy-framework_webversion-1-1.pdf.

International Commission on Large Dams. (N.d.). *Number of Dams by Country Members*. Available at https://www.icold-cigb.org/article/GB/world_register/general_synthesis/number-of-dams-by-country.

Kumar, Sumita. (2007). The China–Pakistan Strategic Relationship: Trade, Investment, Energy and Infrastructure. *Strategic Analysis*, 31:5, 757-790. DOI: 10.1080/09700160701662278.

Liu, J., Zuo, J., Sun, Z., Zillante, G., & Chen, X. (2013). Sustainability in hydropower development—A case study. *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews*, 19, 230-237.

Mahla, P.K. (2025). *China's insertion into the India-Pakistan waters dispute adds a further ripple in South Asia*. The Conversation, U.S. Available at <https://theconversation.com/chinas-insertion-into-india-pakistan-waters-dispute-adds-a-further-ripple-in-south-asia-258891>.

Mahla, P.K. (2024). Navigating borders and waters: India-China border disputes and the complexities of transboundary river management. *Oasis*. 40 (Jun. 2024), 211–230. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18601/16577558.n40.10>.

Ministry of Water Resources. (2023, September 18). *Speech: Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the 18th World Water Congress*. The People's Republic of China.



Available at
http://www.mwr.gov.cn/english/Documents/Speeches/202311/t20231102_1690787.html.

Ministry of Water Resources. (N.d.). *Magnificent Projects*. The People's Republic of China. Available at <http://www.mwr.gov.cn/english/Projects/MagnificentProjects/>.

Ministry of Water Resources. (2019, March 20). *The South-To-North Water Diversion Project*. The People's Republic of China. Available at http://www.mwr.gov.cn/english/Projects/MagnificentProjects/202311/t20231102_1690665.html.

National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) Ltd. (N.d.). *Hydro-electric project*. Government of India. Available at <https://www.nhpcindia.com>.

O'Tuathail, G. (1998). Thinking critically about geopolitics. *The geopolitics reader*, 2, 1-14. Available at https://is.muni.cz/do/fss/57816/40125114/Tuathail_G._Thinking_critically_geopolit.112.pdf.

Pacific Institute. (N.d.). *Water Conflict Database*. Available at <https://www.worldwater.org/water-conflict/>.

Pakistan Embassy (Beijing). (2006, November 26). *Joint Statement Between the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan*. Available at <http://www.pakbj.org/jointstatements/992.htm>.

Panigrahi, Devendra Nath. (2018). *The Himalayas and India-China Relations*. Routledge India.

Patra, Jyotiraj. (2018, September 27). *How to strengthen cooperation for a water-secure South Asia*. The Third Pole. Available at <https://dialogue.earth/en/water/strengthening-south-south-cooperation-for-a-water-secure-south-asia-2/>.

Sadoff, C.W. and Grey, D. (2005) Cooperation on International Rivers: A Continuum for Securing and Sharing Benefits. *Water International*, 30, 420-427. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508060508691886>.

Sinha, Uttam Kumar. (2005). Water Security: A Discursive Analysis. *Strategic Analysis*, 29:2, 317- 331, DOI: 10.1080/09700161.2005.12049808.

Sinha, Uttam Kumar. (2014). India's Water Woes. *The Sunday Pioneer*, New Delhi, 16 March 2014.

Sinha, Uttam Kumar. (2016). *Riverine Neighbourhood: Hydro-Politics in South Asia*. Pentagon Press, New Delhi. p. 43.

Sprouse, Trey. (2022, November 09). *The Promises and Pitfalls of Water-Sharing Cooperation In South Asia*. The Organisation for World Peace (OWP). Available at <https://theowp.org/the-promises-and-pitfalls-of-water-sharing-cooperation-in-south-asia/>.



Transboundary Freshwater Diplomacy Database (TFDD) project. (N.d.). *Product of the Transboundary Freshwater Diplomacy Database*. Oregon State University. Available at <https://transboundarywaters.oregonstate.edu>.

UNESCO. (2025). The United Nations World Water Development Report 2025, Mountains and glaciers: water towers. UNESCO World Water Assessment Programme. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54679/LHPJ5153>.

Water, Peace and Security (WPS) Partnership. (N.d.). *Global Tools: Map*. Available at <https://waterpeacesecurity.org/map>.

Worldometer. (2025). *Population by Country*. Available at <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/#country>.

WorldData.Info. (N.d.). *Country Comparison (India and China)*. Available at <https://www.worlddata.info/country-comparison.php?country1=CHN&country2=IND>.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO EXPLAIN CHINA'S ROLE IN REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS WITH WORLD SYSTEM THEORY?: SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION

FERDI GÜÇYETMEZ

ferdigucyetmez26@gmail.com

University of Bern (Germany), [0000-0003-1204-2606](tel:0000-0003-1204-2606)

TUĞÇE PULURLUOĞLU

tugcepulurluoglu@gmail.com

Nanjing University (China), [0000-0002-6619-3752](tel:0000-0002-6619-3752)

Abstract

This study examines the rise of modern China and its behaviour in the international system within the framework of World System Theory. China has experienced fundamental transformations in its economic, social and political structures with its post-1978 reform and opening-up policies and has become a rising power in the international system. While the World System Theory provides a powerful analytical framework to explain the hierarchical relationships among centre, semi-periphery and periphery countries, how effective is this theory in explaining a dynamic and rapidly changing actor like China? This article argues that the World System Theory can still explain the rise of modern China and its behaviour in the international system. The research analyses China's role in regional organisations, using the example of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and how this affects the international system. In this context, it addresses the limitations of World System Theory in explaining modern China's behaviour.

Keywords

World System Theory, China, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Centre-semi-periphery-periphery.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a ascensão da China moderna e o seu comportamento no sistema internacional no âmbito da Teoria do Sistema Mundial. A China passou por transformações fundamentais nas suas estruturas económicas, sociais e políticas com as suas políticas de reforma e abertura pós-1978 e tornou-se uma potência emergente no sistema internacional. Embora a Teoria do Sistema Mundial forneça um poderoso quadro analítico para explicar as relações hierárquicas entre os países centrais, semiperiféricos e periféricos, quão eficaz é esta teoria para explicar um ator dinâmico e em rápida mudança como a China? Este artigo argumenta que a Teoria do Sistema Mundial ainda pode explicar a ascensão da China moderna e o seu comportamento no sistema internacional. A investigação analisa o papel da China nas organizações regionais, utilizando o exemplo da Organização de Cooperação de Xangai (SCO), e como isso afeta o sistema internacional. Neste contexto, aborda as limitações da Teoria do Sistema Mundial para explicar o comportamento da China moderna.



Palavras-chave

Teoria do Sistema Mundial, China, Organização de Cooperação de Xangai, Centro-semiperiferia-periferia.

How to cite this article

Güçyetmez, Ferdi & Pulurluoğlu, Tuğçe (2025). Is it Possible to Explain China's Role in Regional Organisations with World System Theory?: Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 84-105. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.5>

Article submitted on 16th April 2025 and accepted for publication on 01st September 2025.





IS IT POSSIBLE TO EXPLAIN CHINA'S ROLE IN REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS WITH WORLD SYSTEM THEORY?: SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION

FERDI GÜÇYETMEZ

TUĞÇE PULURLUOĞLU

Introduction¹

The fast-moving globalisation process was based on the assumption that rich countries would focus on high-value-added activities - especially design, R&D (Research and Development) and management - while low- and middle-income countries would undertake production processes. However, over time, manufacturing countries also started to learn high-level activities such as design, technology development and brand creation. Thus, the functional distinction between the centre and the periphery became increasingly blurred.

Countries that specialised in the lower rungs of the supply chain began to deepen their positions and climb towards the system's upper levels. On the other hand, countries in the centre started to lose their innovation power due to high costs, bureaucratic bottlenecks and labour shortages. One of the main misconceptions of this situation was the assumption that production based on cheap labour would provide a sustainable competitive advantage. However, in the long run, this model suppressed rather than encouraged local innovation and weakened the competitiveness capacity of the centre countries.

The rise of China has posed a significant challenge to this structure. Initially taking the role of the 'world factory', China has not only confined itself to labour-intensive manufacturing but has also begun to enter domains monopolised by the central countries, such as technological learning, innovation, and design. Therefore, China has become a hybrid actor capable of exerting influence at both lower and upper levels of the supply chain. This situation diminishes the rigidity of the centre-periphery divide and even indicates that in some areas, peripheral countries may have the potential to advance inherent within the system. The case of China is not merely a story of ascent but also signifies a structural rupture that questions the fundamental workings of the World System.

¹ In this study, Chat-Gpt was used for the translation of Chinese sources.



Modern China has significantly reshaped its role on the global stage over the past four decades, establishing itself as a major player in international politics. In 1978, economic reforms and opening-up policies initiated under Deng Xiaoping's leadership positioned China at the centre of the world system as a swiftly growing economic power. This transformation extended beyond economics; China's political, cultural, and military strategies were also overhauled. China's rise has garnered considerable attention due to its strategic and geopolitical policies. It has begun to dominate different regions worldwide through new political influences, from Africa to the Arctic and from Latin America to the Middle East. Examples include mining agreements in Africa, military bases or observer status in the Arctic Council, infrastructure investments in Latin America, port agreements, and 5G infrastructure networks. Today, as the second-largest economy globally (Fang & Nolan, 2019), China plays a crucial role in constructing a multipolar global order. Its influence on regional and global power dynamics has sparked renewed discussions about the traditional centre-periphery relations in world politics.

In this context, World System Theory provides a widely used framework for analysing economic and political relations among countries. Its theoretical approach, originally developed by Immanuel Wallerstein, explains the world power structure through the relationships between centre, semi-periphery and periphery countries. World System Theory has traditionally been framed from an ethnocentric European perspective and has accounted for the asymmetrical structures of the developing world and the workings of capitalism in a globalised world. Yet the emergence of a fast-evolving, powerful actor like China calls into question the fundamental assumptions of this theory. Specifically, how does the evolution of economic, social and political systems in China differ from the practice and historical perspectives of the theory?

Indeed, the World Systems Theory offers a compelling analysis of the inequalities between core countries, the constraints on development in semi-peripheral nations, and the colonised status of peripheral countries. However, this theory faces challenges in understanding the rapidly evolving global relations and the strategic directions of dynamic actors. While China has historically been classified as a 'peripheral' or 'semi-peripheral' country, in the last quarter-century it has positioned itself as a power close to the centre, even transforming the nature of this structure by introducing alternative models that challenge the dynamics of the existing core structure in certain areas (e.g., production, technology, and infrastructure investments). China's rise extends beyond its economic size to encompass its role as a military power in the South China Sea, a diplomatic influence in Europe and Eurasia, and a cultural and economic force in Africa. Its global initiatives, such as the 'Belt and Road Initiative' or the 'Arctic Silk Road', challenge the hierarchical frameworks proposed by the World Systems Theory and reveal a new form of global interaction.

It can be claimed that China's global projects aim to create a new centre in the world economy. These projects aim to deepen China's outward-looking economic strategies and global orientations, while expanding China's international sphere of influence. With the Belt and Road Initiative, China seeks to gain more influence in the world system, while simultaneously creating an alternative to the traditional Western-centric world order.



However, the question is whether China's use of its strategic position in the regional and global projects is enough for it to do so and whether it will change its recognition of related goals in its global projects and its position in the global system. Through World System Theory, when discussing China's role in regional organisations, it should be viewed as a transformational process that inquires into the existing world order. We can develop an understanding of the long-term evolution of the capitalist world economy through this framework.

China's engagement in regional institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) showcases its attempts to shape international architecture. It is helpful to analyse the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation on its own terms — both for its security, economic cooperation and diplomatic relations goals for China in the region — but also for what they signal about China's conception of the global order and the role it wants to play in it.

It is important to note that regional organisations are not merely platforms designed to conform to the interests of China alone, because the very frameworks shape a new environment that redefines power relations in global politics. China leverages its influence within regional organisations to tilt the balance of power in its favour in the global order. Given this, analysing China's regional cooperation and global projects becomes highly crucial for understanding not just the rise of China but also the new structure of power in world politics.

We are interested in discussing whether China's global projects are contributing to regionalisation² in world politics and whether they represent China's endeavour to develop its own spheres of influence in that respect. This vibrancy of Chinese Foreign Affairs not only strengthens China's national interests in regional organisations but also constructs the regionalisation process of world politics. China's vision of regional cooperation is not just regional but a global power centre, placing its leadership at its centre.

In conclusion, this study aims to discuss the limitations of World System Theory in understanding China's rise and international behaviour and to provide a new perspective for dynamic and changing actors. China's rise is not only limited to economic growth but is also shaping world politics through its strategic orientations in international relations. Although the World System Theory provides a framework to explain China's rise, the methods of analysis offered by the theory prove to be insufficient in understanding the place of a dynamic and rapidly changing actor. In this context, this study aims to provide a new perspective on the theory in understanding China's rise and its place in the world system.

² The word 'regionalisation' here refers to the organisation of global political and economic relations around smaller, region-centric structures. The network of relations that China has established in certain geographies through instruments such as the Belt and Road Initiative, infrastructure investments and trade agreements, while encouraging this regionalisation, is also considered as part of China's strategy to establish influence, set norms and propose alternative arrangements in these areas.



Examination of the Concepts of Centre, Semi-periphery and Periphery

Immanuel Wallerstein defined the world system as 'a historical system with a definite beginning and end, defined by geographical boundaries' (Wallerstein, 2000, cited in Williams, 2013, p. 202). This definition reveals Wallerstein's emphasis on the decisive role of historical events and processes in his approach to the social sciences. Wallerstein defined himself as a historical social scientist, and in this context, he built his analyses on broad historical perspectives. In particular, the historical approach of the French Annales School and the works of Fernand Braudel were among the main influences on Wallerstein's world systems theory. Wallerstein, influenced by Braudel, included not only leaders and great events in his historical analyses, but also the lives of ordinary people, economic processes and social structures (Braudel, 1972; Malhut, 2011: 205-214).

According to Wallerstein, the modern world system emerged in Western Europe in the late 15th century (Ness & Cope, 2021). This transformation is associated with four fundamental structural collapses that Western Europe faced in the same period: the decline in the power of feudal suzerains, the weakening of centralised states, the questioning of the authority of the Church and the collapse of the Mongol Empire (Wallerstein, 1974). These collapses upset the political and economic balance in the region and created a favourable environment for the development of capitalism. The dissolution of the feudal order led to the transformation of production relations and the emergence of the capitalist mode of production, while the decline in the authority of the Church allowed the rise of secular and market-oriented economic systems.

This new economic order became intertwined with the modern interstate system. However, Wallerstein saw the relationship between capitalism and the interstate system not only as a relationship of complementarity, but also as an interaction full of contradictions. The armed conflicts caused by interstate competition and the economic costs of these conflicts had a direct impact on the functioning of the capitalist system. The conflicts in Europe, especially in the 16th and 17th centuries, led to a slowdown in capital accumulation and diverted resources to military expenditures. However, such contradictions are critical for understanding how the capitalist system has survived institutionally and structurally (Wallerstein, 1983; Arrighi, 1994).

Hegemonic Cycles and Collapse in the World System

According to Wallerstein, the stability and continuity of the capitalist system depend on the existence of a hegemonic power. Hegemony is a situation in which a particular state leads the world market by achieving economic, commercial and financial superiority. However, this leadership is not limited to economic advantages; it also includes political and cultural dominance. The hegemonic power consolidates its economic supremacy by gaining control of global trade routes and dominating financial sectors. At the end of this process, the hegemonic state combines its superiority in the fields of production, trade and finance to become a power that directs the international system (Arrighi, 1990).

Three major hegemonic powers are identified in the history of the modern world system (Babones & Chase 2012): the Netherlands, Britain and the United States of America. These states achieved their hegemonic position as a result of protracted wars (commonly



referred to as the Thirty Years' War). The first was the Thirty Years' War between 1618 and 1648. These wars resulted in the Netherlands gaining superiority over the Habsburgs. In this period, the Netherlands controlled global trade routes and provided leadership in the financial sector through innovative instruments (Wallerstein, 1984). The second was the Napoleonic Wars, which took place between 1792 and 1815. In this period, Britain triumphed against French interests by utilising its economic superiority, supported by the Industrial Revolution. Finally, the world wars between 1914 and 1945 led to the emergence of the United States of America (USA) as the hegemonic power. In this process, the US led the global order with both its production capacity and its control over the financial system (Silver & Slater, 1999).

The leadership of hegemonic powers usually has a limited lifespan. According to Wallerstein, hegemonic states cannot sustain their economic and political advantages indefinitely. The balance of power mechanism, as an inherent phenomenon of hegemonic processes, provides opportunities for other states to rise. In this process, hegemonic powers try to impose their cultural dominance to consolidate their position and increase their legitimacy. Although language, religion and other cultural elements are among the tools of this hegemony, the transfer of science and social science paradigms to peripheral and semi-peripheral countries has a more lasting effect. Such hegemony implies not only economic and political, but also intellectual and ideological leadership (Wallerstein, 2004).

Applicability of the Theory in the Emerging Powers Context

One of the questions we need to ask before entering the subject is whether Wallerstein's theory of world-systems remains valid in the context of rising powers in today's international system. Since the origins of this theoretical approach go back to geographical discoveries, it is important to identify historical points. From this perspective, it may be easier to focus on the post-WTO period in the global system. When we look at the last thirty years of the global system, countries such as China, India, Brazil and South Africa are in a process of transition from the semi-periphery to the centre. Their economic growth rates, production capacities and commercial activities can be considered as indicators of structural changes in the world-system (Arrighi, 2007). For example, China's influence in the global economy can be observed not only through the increase in its production capacity but also through its investment policies and soft power influence in regions such as Africa and Asia. This confirms Wallerstein's predictions about the dynamics of the transition to the centre.

However, the movement of rising powers towards the centre also creates new contradictions and rivalries. In particular, existing centre powers such as the US and the EU use instruments such as trade policies (Rojo, 2023), technological embargoes and regional alliances to balance this rise. In this context, Wallerstein's concepts of balance of power and hegemony provide a critical framework for understanding the dynamics of the international system (Huang & Patman, 2013). Moreover, technological changes and the rise of the digital economy are accelerating the transitions in the world system and reshaping the development strategies of semi-peripheral countries (Chase-Dunn, 2014).



Wallerstein's theory also emphasises the importance of cultural hegemony and ideological leadership in these transitions. Rising powers are increasing their influence not only in the economic and commercial spheres but also in global cultural production and scientific progress. For example, China's rapid rise in the field of technology and the 'Belt and Road' initiative aim to create not only economic but also cultural and political influence (Silver, 2020). This situation reveals the new dimensions of hegemony struggles envisaged by Wallerstein in his system theory.

Hegemonic Cycles and Collapse: Creative Destructions

After discussing the applicability of the theory in the light of specific case studies, we conclude that new dynamics are emerging in the current international system, such as hegemonic transformations, the decline of great powers, the rise of new powers and creative destruction. The leadership of hegemonic powers usually has a limited lifespan. According to Wallerstein, hegemonic states cannot sustain their economic and political advantages indefinitely. The balance of power mechanism, as an inherent phenomenon of hegemonic processes, provides opportunities for other states to rise. However, this process brings not only the loss of hegemony but also the emergence of new powers. Joseph Schumpeter's concept of 'creative destruction' (Schumpeter, 1942) provides an important explanatory framework in this context. The collapse of the old hegemonic order often results in the rise of a new order, supported by new technologies, economic models and political structures (Schumpeter, 1942).

For example, the hegemony gained by Britain in the 19th century through the Industrial Revolution was underpinned by an economic and technological transformation. However, this hegemony declined as production advantages eroded and rising powers such as Germany and the USA increased their industrial capacity (Silver, 2020). Likewise, the American leadership of the mid-20th century rested in part on financial and technological preeminence in the postwar era. Yet today, China's rapid ascent toward new frontiers in the digital economy, technology, and green energy is a modern example of creative destruction (Silver, 2020).

The kaleidoscope of creative destruction allows new forces to arise and replace the void of the old order that was unravelling. This process, in addition to reshaping the balance of power economically and politically, translates into struggles for the leadership of the cultural and ideological struggle. The theory of hegemony expounded by Wallerstein constitutes a powerful tool to explain those transformations. In the face of the old hegemonic powers seeking to compensate for their waning economic advantage with cultural hegemony, the new powers filled the space created by technological and commercial innovation. Consequently, Creative destruction contributes both to structural transformations in the capitalist world system and to its self-reproduction. If creative destruction results in the integration of new technologies, actors or modes of production within the system, this serves the stabilisation of the system, because a renewal of the existing order takes place. However, if creative destruction causes existing institutions, norms or balances of power to become unsustainable - such as the weakening of hegemonic powers or the emergence of new actors with radical demands - then a process of change or transformation begins in the system.



In this sense, the World-Systems Analysis of Immanuel Wallerstein is not only capable of explaining the overall processes of history but also of moving towards a framework for analysing the dynamics of the structure of the modern international system (Huang & Patman, 2013). One concept in particular, which actually extends across all four models, is that of creative destruction, which coincides with Wallerstein's hegemonic cycles, and that helps us purport the connection between the fall of old powers and the rise of new ones. Today, the rise of powers is therefore not only reflected in their tangible advantages over others but also in the way they exercise sovereignty in the cultural and ideological domains.

The relevance of the theory is that it demonstrates that great catastrophes are not merely the final word but also a new chapter. The modern world system has been restructured through such creative destruction throughout history, and with it, a new order has been created. The part taken by China, India and other ascendant powers rates as an updated chapter of historical cycles of hegemony. Wallerstein's framework continues to offer a legitimate and useful theoretical basis for explaining such changes. As long as the rise of rising powers within the system takes place within the institutions and rules of the existing centre, the stability of the world system is preserved, since the way the system functions continues even if the balance of power changes. The rise of China, for example, serves this stability as long as it is compatible with the institutions of neoliberal globalisation. However, when these powers question the structure of the existing centre by proposing new norms, institutions and regulations, this leads to a transformation of the system. China's efforts to build alternative financial institutions (such as the AIIB) or digital infrastructure norms are examples of the latter category.

China's Economic and Political Rise: A Challenge to the World System?

Different perspectives on the consequences (e.g., business, foreign policy) of China's integration into the world system are discussed (Kızılaslan, 2023). Some realist theorists claim that the rise of China will result in a hegemonic conflict between the US and China, and the US perceives this process as a threat (Mearsheimer, 2019). The liberal view contends that China is already part of the global system in the form of free trade and economic interdependence and that the forces of cooperation in this process can be managed (Keohane & Nye, 2011). In stark contrast, critical theories regard China's rise as not merely an issue of economics and politics, but rather the establishment of a new balance of power to counter-hegemonic ideological and cultural power (Silver, 2020).

China's economic and political rise represents a significant transformation process in the world system. While Wallerstein's hegemonic cycles consider China's rise as a natural evolution of the system, Schumpeter's concept of creative destruction shows that this process is supported by innovative economic models. China's future role will depend on the flexibility of the current global order and how the competition between the US and China is managed. This process will be shaped not only as an economic power shift but also as a struggle for ideological and cultural hegemony.

China's place in the global economy and politics has been shaped through various stages throughout history. The Silk and Spice Routes started from China and extended through



Anatolia and the Mediterranean to the interior of Europe, through which China played an important role in the trade of goods such as silk, spices, precious jewellery and paper (Frankopan, 2015). However, geographical discoveries from the 16th century onwards led to the loss of the importance of land trade routes as sea routes became more advantageous (Brook, 2010). As a result, China's economic power gradually declined, and the country began to decline in the global trade system. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution in Europe (Babones & Chase, 2012), the shift of production to mechanised industry led to a change in global trade networks, and China lost its competitiveness against the industrialised West (Pomeranz, 2000).

China's economic decline also had major political repercussions. The Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860) revealed China's weakness in the global system and its vulnerability against foreign powers (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006). As a result of these wars with Britain, China was forced to sign the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, ceding Hong Kong to Britain and opening its ports to Western powers (Spence, 1990). Similarly, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 symbolised China's loss of regional dominance and the rise of Japan in East Asia (Vogel, 2011). Following this war, China's sovereignty over Taiwan came to an end, and Japan gained a clear dominance over Chinese territory (Meisner, 1999). These developments caused China to remain in the background in world politics, and the country was increasingly dragged into internal turmoil under the influence of imperialist states.

In 1912, as a result of the Wuchang Uprising, the Qing Dynasty was overthrown, and the Republic of China was established (Garnaut, Song & Fang, 2018). However, this transition process failed to stabilise China, and economic, political and social problems deepened (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006). Within the newly established Republic of China, the increasing influence of the Communist Party and its political conflicts with the Kuomintang further increased the instability of the country (Baum, 1996). Chinese domestic politics became an arena of conflict between different political groups supported by the US and the USSR, which led to serious instability in the country (Nathan, 1990). Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931 once again showed China's weakness in the face of external threats. When Japan declared war on China in 1937, the Communist Party and the Kuomintang government suspended their civil wars and formed a common front against Japan (Vogel, 2011). However, this unity came to an end after World War II, and civil war flared up again in China. In 1949, the Communist Party led by Mao Zedong won the civil war and established the People's Republic of China (Shirk, 1993).

The Mao period (1949-1976) was characterised by China's closed economy and authoritarian rule. Mao's economic policy focused on centralised planning based on heavy industry under state control, and foreign trade was limited (Meisner, 1999). Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and Great Leap Forward policies were implemented with the claim of strengthening the Chinese economy, but led to major economic setbacks and social crises in the country (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006). During the Cultural Revolution, millions of people were arrested on political charges or forced labour and economic development was severely hampered (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006). By the end of this period, China increasingly lagged behind the Western world economically and remained outside the world trading system.



Effects of the Reform and Opening-Up Process on the Global World System

The death of Mao Zedong in 1976 is widely regarded as a significant turning point in China's modern history. Although the nation had made progress and strengthened its position since 1949, it continued to face issues of poverty and underdevelopment. Concerns such as food security and notable disparities in living standards, particularly in comparison to regions like Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan, posed substantial challenges to the CPC's governance and policies (Garnaut, 2018). Acknowledging the urgent need for change, the leadership sought to formulate policies to reshape the country's future, culminating in the groundbreaking Reform and Opening-Up initiative of 1978.

Focusing on economic growth rather than ideology, Deng implemented market reforms and started to integrate China with the global economy (Vogel, 2011). Deng viewed reform as an essential pathway to ensure the country's long-term prosperity, and following the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee, he managed to secure broad support within the CPC for his liberalising agenda. His vision of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" emphasised economic modernisation, a revised development strategy, and a comprehensive reform of China's economic structure and the state.

The initial wave of reforms was concentrated in rural areas, beginning with the de-collectivisation of agriculture, which resulted in a significant enhancement of productivity and an improvement in rural livelihoods (Liu & Wang, 2008). Over time, these reforms were expanded to encompass urban and industrial sectors, progressively incorporating market mechanisms. Foreign investment was encouraged, private property was allowed to expand in certain areas, and China's participation in world trade was accelerated (Baum, 1996).

Moreover, initiatives such as the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs), notably those in Shenzhen and Zhuhai, played a pivotal role in attracting foreign direct investment by offering favourable conditions for foreign investors, including tax incentives, simplified administrative procedures, and improved infrastructure. These SEZs functioned as experimental arenas for market-oriented economic policies, thereby enabling China to integrate with the global economy without compromising its political ideology (Tantri, 2013). This strategic approach fostered China's economic modernisation, facilitated technology transfer, and enhanced exports, contributing significantly to its rapid economic growth (Stoltenberg, 1984). Thanks to these reforms, China's economic growth rate has increased rapidly since the 1980s, and the country has become a centre of global production and trade. However, during this process, the authoritarian rule of the Chinese Communist Party continued and political reforms remained largely limited (Shirk, 1993).

China's historical transformation shows that the delicate balance between economic growth and political stability is constantly being reshaped. In the post-Deng Xiaoping period, economic growth was sustained under the leadership of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, but authoritarian rule continued (Zhao, 2006). Today, although China has emerged as the world's second-largest economy, it is far from a Western-type democratic



transformation in political terms (Saich, 2004). This process shows that although China has become a global economic power, it has developed a different governance model from Western states by maintaining its authoritarian governance approach (Shirk, 1993).

China's economic and political rise in the last four decades has led to important debates in international relations. The impact of this rise on the world system is analysed through different theoretical approaches (Huang & Patman, 2013). Immanuel Wallerstein's World Systems Analysis and Joseph Schumpeter's concept of creative destruction can help us look at this issue from a different perspective (Wallerstein, 2004; Schumpeter, 1942). China's economic growth and technological advances challenge the existing hegemonic order. Wallerstein's analysis reveals that China's rise is a natural evolution of the global system and should be considered as an inevitable outcome of hegemonic cycles (Silver, 2020).

One of the defining aspects of China's relationship with the international system is its economic transformation within the global economy following the reform and opening-up policies led by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 (Huang & Patman, 2013). The transition from a centrally planned economy to a more market-oriented economy was marked by several key steps, including China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001. China's accession to the WTO marked its entry into the global trading system, facilitating its growth and positioning it as a major player in the world economy. This access to the EU market depended on a series of effective economic reforms, such as lowering tariffs, increasing transparency in trade and eliminating subsidies (Jelisavac-Trošić, 2019). Integration into the global trading system has not only been the main source of China's export-led growth, but has also mediated access to global markets and technologies for its industries. However, the integration process has also brought challenges for local firms, such as intensified competition and higher levels of scrutiny over business practices (Zhang, 2005). Despite these challenges and setbacks, WTO membership has consolidated China's leading position in the world economy and demonstrated its willingness, even eagerness, to become a major player in the global economic system.

Since 1980, China has grown at an average annual rate of over 9%, making it the centre of the world economy (World Bank, 2022). China's investments in industry and technology have made it one of the most important players in international trade. While China's place in the global system is transformative, it is also fraught with challenges. The Chinese state struggles to balance domestic priorities with external expectations.

For example, domestically, the government places great emphasis on economic stability, poverty reduction and sustainable development, which sometimes conflict with international calls for greater market liberalisation and adherence to international standards (Potter, 2007). In China, the protection of state-owned enterprises or the regulation of technology industries has been characterised as protectionist, albeit in line with national strategic objectives. Criticisms of unfair trade practices, intellectual property theft and barriers to accessing Chinese markets have led to high-profile trade tensions and tariffs, further escalating tensions (Tyagi, 2020). China's balancing actions in these two areas are another key level of China's engagement in the global system (Huang & Patman, 2013).'



The economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping have profoundly reshaped the global system, catalysing China's ascent to the status of an economic powerhouse while introducing complex challenges in international relations and trade. The rapid economic growth and integration into the global market facilitated by these reforms have created significant opportunities for global economic development. The country's role as a significant exporter and importer has intricately linked its economy with those of other nations, fostering mutual economic interdependence. In particular, the Belt and Road Initiative has enabled China to expand its global sphere of influence and reinforced its dominance over global supply chains by increasing infrastructure investments in developing countries (Mearsheimer, 2019). However, the US and Europe's perception of this project as a geopolitical strategy has led to tension in the global balance of power.

Joseph Schumpeter's concept of creative destruction can be explained by the replacement of old economic and political orders with innovative systems. China's investments in the digital economy, artificial intelligence and green energy are eroding the US technological leadership in global competition (Breznitz, 2021). While technology companies such as Huawei, Alibaba and Tencent have become influential players on a global scale, China's superiority in 5G technologies threatens the US dominance over technology. From a Schumpeterian perspective, China's rise is not only the result of hegemonic transformation but also part of the dynamic nature of the economic system (Schumpeter, 1942).

China's influence in global politics is reflected in its involvement in platforms such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and BRICS (Garnaut, Song & Fang, 2018). Its efforts to create an alternative to Western-centred financial systems enable China to have a greater say in global governance (Kissinger, 2011). However, China's sovereignty claims in the South China Sea and its Taiwan policy increase tensions with the West. The US and its allies see China's expansion of its regional influence as a threat, and this situation raises the prospect of a new Cold War scenario (Allison, 2017).

Today, China's economy grew by 5.2 per cent in 2023, increasing its total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to 126.06 trillion yuan (approximately \$17.71 trillion) (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2024: 3). This growth rate indicates that China is recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, industrial production and retail sales increased by 4.6 per cent and 7.2 per cent, respectively, in 2023 (NIB, 2024: 5). These data reveal that China has increased its production capacity and domestic consumption potential.

In terms of foreign trade, China's export and import volumes have also shown a significant increase. In 2023, China's total foreign trade volume reached USD 6.05 trillion (Ministry of Commerce of China, 2024: 8). This figure shows that China's share in global trade is increasing and its effectiveness in international markets is strengthening. In addition, China's foreign investments have also increased. In 2023, China's direct investments abroad totalled 153.7 billion dollars (Ministry of Commerce of China, 2024: 12). This shows that China has gone beyond being just a production centre in the global economy and has become a capital-exporting country.

The Belt and Road Initiative is one of the cornerstones of China's global economic strategy. The initiative covers a wide range of projects such as infrastructure projects, ports, railways and energy investments in Asia, Europe and Africa. As of August 2023,



\$22 billion had been invested in 75 projects from the Silk Road Fund (Anadolu Agency, 2023). In addition, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has so far approved loans totalling \$43.6 billion for 227 projects under the Belt and Road (Anadolu Agency, 2023). These investments can be considered as part of China's strategy to increase its influence in the global economy and rise to the position of a centre country.

Geopolitically, China's investments under the Belt and Road Initiative cover many countries in Asia, Africa and Europe. For example, in Pakistan, billions of dollars have been invested in energy and infrastructure projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. In Africa, large-scale investments such as railway and port projects have been realised in Nigeria (Fang, 2024: 35). These investments increase China's economic and political influence in these regions, bringing it closer to the position of a centre country.

Figure 1. China's Transition from Semi-Periphery to Near-Centre Status.

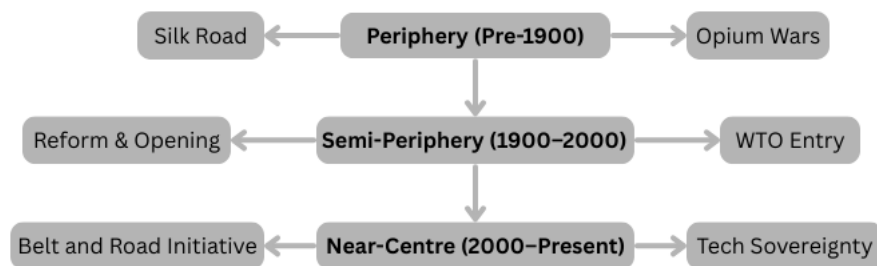


Figure generated by the author based on the study's findings.

In conclusion, as shown in Figure 1, China's economic performance in recent years, along with its investments under the Belt and Road Initiative, has positioned it as a country moving from the periphery to the centre in the context of Wallerstein's centre-periphery theory. With its high-tech production structure, increasing foreign trade volume and international investments, China is gradually increasing its influence in the global economy.

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Regional Sphere of Influence Policies

In the wake of the Cold War, coupled with China's significant economic and political challenges at home, China's foreign policymakers continually faced the challenge of balancing two conflicting self-images: that of a great power and that of a developing country (Zhao, 2015; Zhang, 2004). They inherently regarded China as a great power due to its historical legacy, cultural richness, and large population, and they valued its emerging status on the global stage. However, there was uncertainty about whether China's capabilities would enable it to wield sufficient influence internationally. Thus, in this period, China's identity was stressed as a developing country and adopted a cautious and low-profile approach. This approach was guided by Deng Xiaoping's "taoguang



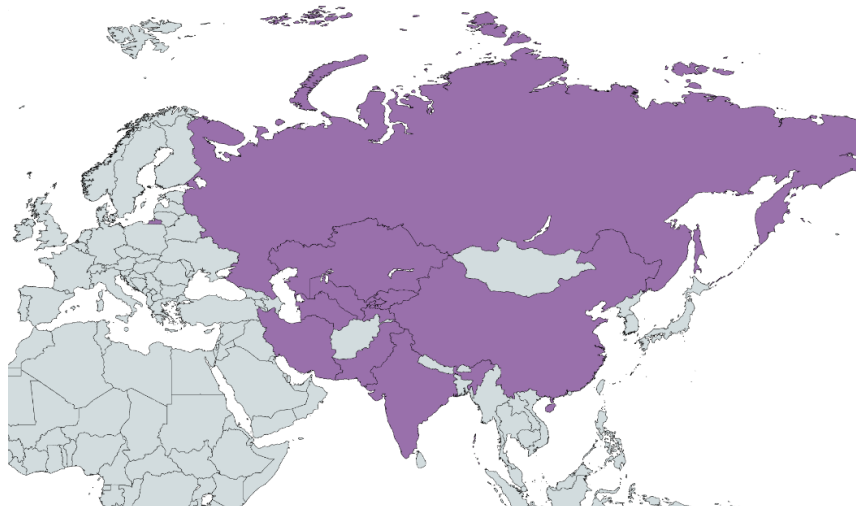
yanghui" (韬光养晦) principle, which emphasised concealing China's capabilities, prioritising national strength-building, and avoiding confrontation.

China's foreign policy changed significantly during Hu Jintao's rule, moving from a low-profile policy to one that is more proactive and assertive on the international stage. This was a unique and transformative moment for China on the global stage that saw a sharp increase in the Chinese economy's and society's diplomatic, economic, and strategic connections outside its borders. The administration devoted major efforts toward actively engaging with other nations through international organisations, as well as through the promotion of the idea of peaceful rise (Wen, 2003). This foreign policy, guided by Deng's principles, represented a more assertive and active stance in international affairs, reflecting China's determination for peaceful development and benevolent interdependence (He & Liu, 2021).

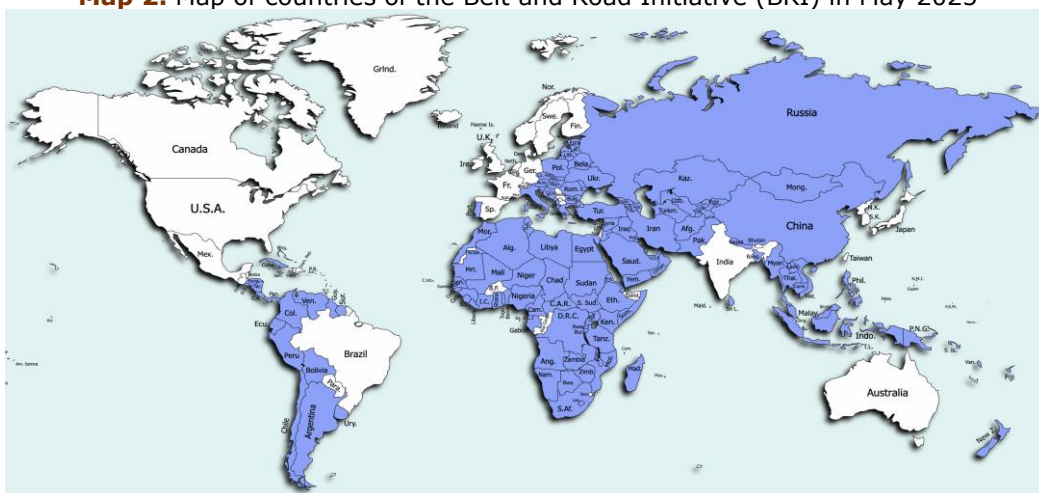
Moreover, China has been a founding and active member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which was created in 2001 based on the earlier Shanghai Five. So far, the SCO has played a significant role in facilitating China's peaceful rise strategy by fostering regional security cooperation, economic development, and political stability among the member states. The principles of mutual respect, non-interference, and collective decision-making emphasised by the SCO align with China's vision of a harmonious and balanced international order, contributing to its perception as a responsible great power on the world stage (Carroll, 2011; Yuan, 2010).

Xi Jinping is the biggest political force in 2012 and has transformed China's foreign policy into a better vision. Xi has implemented a new approach to diplomacy, known as "major-country diplomacy", reflecting China's ability to project confidence in its growing economic and international standing (Lin, 2018). Xi's language towards multilateralism also pointed towards a growing role for China as a leader of the developing world, while also reaffirming this as a step in the right direction towards a multipolar world, where global power is not only held by one superpower. As a result, China has expanded its role in international organisations, including the United Nations, the World Health Organisation and the World Trade Organisation.

Accordingly, Xi has always regarded the SCO as an important channel to increase China's regional and global clout. Xi has overseen a dramatically expanding SCO, not only in membership, but in range. India and Pakistan attained SCO membership in 2017, thus extending its reach to South Asia, while Iran's membership in 2023 expanded its reach to the Middle East. Originally established to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism, today the SCO's mandate has expanded to encompass a range of issues, such as energy security and cooperation, economic development, and emerging non-traditional security challenges. Therefore, the SCO is also the largest regional organisation in the world based on geography and population, as shown in map 1, covering about 80 per cent of the Eurasian landmass and 40 per cent of the world population. By 2021, its members represented 20 per cent of the world's economy. Following the inclusion of Iran, the SCO controls one-fifth of the globe's oil reserves and 44 per cent of natural gas reserves (see Teekah 2025).

**Map 1.** Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Members.

Source: Map created by the author using data from the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Secretariat website (sectsco.org).

Map 2. Map of countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in May 2025

Source: Map created by the author using data from Christoph Nedopil's findings (www.greenfdc.org).

China's policy of regional sphere of influence takes root in its economic initiatives, too. As one of Xi's flagship and most ambitious projects, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) seeks to expand and strengthen connectivity and cooperation between Asia, Africa, and Europe. The BRI has not only expanded China's geopolitical clout, but it has also strategically financed infrastructure projects that allow China to access critical natural resources and strategic locations. The massive economic growth in China has also improved China's geopolitical interests by establishing more diplomatic relations with several countries and enhancing China's soft power and thus enhancing its sway in shaping regional and global governance frameworks (Chiebuka, Oyedele, & Odike, 2025; Feng et al., 2023). Map 2 illustrates the extensive network of participating BRI countries,



underscoring the geographic scope of the initiative and reflecting China's growing influence across multiple continents.

Moreover, in Xi's vision of humanity, he has championed the idea of a "community of common destiny for mankind," which highlighted China's aspiration to build a just and equitable multipolar world and inclusive and beneficial economic globalisation (MFA, 2025). The ideas of 'peaceful development' and the 'community of common destiny' are vastly different. The latter shows that China intends to make great efforts to establish a new international and regional order and to take the lead in establishing the community of common destiny (Liu, 2015). This is a clear break from the 'low profile' strategy and indicates that China wants to take up a more activist role in global governance." Xi also stressed what is now referred to as the "two guidances" (两个引导), namely, that China should "guide" the international community as it drives "jointly shape a fairer and more reasonable new international order" and "jointly safeguard international security" (Xinhua, 2017). His strong personal interest in foreign affairs — marked by extensive engagements with diplomats and his so-called cloud diplomacy — mirrors his hands-on approach to foreign policy. These changes under Xi's leadership have greatly advanced China's aim for multipolarity and also helped to straightforwardly enhance its multilateralism.

Realising this, we can conclude that China has transformed its regional and global strategy from the opening-up reforms to the present. Through a more assertive and multilateral approach, China has bolstered its diplomatic, economic, and strategic soft power, carving out an evolved and ambitious image of itself that grows from the roots planted during the Opening Up Reforms. The change illustrates how confident, even ambitious, China is to reconfigure its global role by using trade, diplomacy, military modernisation, and technological innovation. A grasp of this shift has much to say about explaining the tribute and China's plans for the future.

The establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are prime examples of China's proactive engagement in multilateral platforms and global trade networks. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, these multilateral strategies have been further prioritised and expanded to solidify China's regional sphere of influence and promote a multipolar world order. China, once considered a periphery country, has rapidly ascended to the semi-periphery, and now its actions can be interpreted as an attempt to transition from a semi-peripheral to a core power within the global system. This shift is leading to a re-division of labour and economic opportunities, impacting both the Global North and South (Li, 2020; Saredidine, 2021), not only serving to China's economic interests but also positioning it as a counterweight to Western influence, particularly that of the United States (Jia, 2007). The BRI, in particular, is seen as a potential new world-system where China could emerge as a core power, exerting significant influence over participating states.

Conclusion: Is World System Theory Adequate to Explain China?

World System Theory still provides an important framework for analysing China's economic rise and its place in the global system. However, China's economic growth,



technological development, geopolitical moves, and efforts to create an alternative global order transcend this classical theory. In other words, we can say that new theoretical changes are needed for the modern rising powers.

China's high-value-added technological investments, innovation values, new global projects, and search for new markets take it beyond the classical theory. The reason for this is that, according to world-systems theory, only central countries produce this kind of added value. In other words, China goes beyond the traditional definition. According to the theory, semi-peripheral countries are expected to develop through technology transfer, but China is not merely an importer of technology; it has created its own technology giants and begun to assert global leadership in strategic fields such as artificial intelligence, quantum technology, 10G technology, and space research.

China is also transcending this theoretical model by creating its own regional models in opposition to Western-centric economic models. The SCO is one of the organisations that transcends this model. By creating its own regional dynamism through the SCO, China is once again strengthening its role as a central country. According to World System Theory, semi-peripheral countries remain in the global economic order as long as they are dependent on central economies.

The SCO has provided China with the opportunity to reduce its dependence and establish new economic alliances. The integration of international projects into the SCO, SCO-centred energy agreements and economic agreements, the expansion of commercial partnerships with an SCO-centred local currency, etc., have brought China to the position of a central country.

In conclusion, while the World-System Theory largely explains China's rise in the global system through the SCO, it has some shortcomings. To fully understand how China will shape the global system, alternative theoretical frameworks are needed. In addition to this theoretical approach, theoretical approaches such as hegemony transition theory, multipolar world theory, the Neo-Gramscian approach, and balance of interests theory will help complement Wallerstein's theory. New theoretical changes are needed for modern rising powers.

References

- Anadolu Agency. (2023). Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi kapsamında yapılan yatırımlar ve AIIB'nin projeleri. Access Line: <https://www.aa.com.tr>
- Arrighi, G. (1990). *The Developmentalist Illusion: A Reconceptualisation of the Semiperiphery*. W. G. Martin (Ed.). *Semiperipheral States in the World-Economy*, Greenwood Press, 11-42.
- Arrighi, G. (1994). *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, And the Origins of Our Times*. Verso Books.
- Babones, S., & Chase-Dunn, C. (2012). *Routledge Handbook of World-Systems Analysis* (1st ed.). Routledge.



Baum, R. (1996). *Burying Mao: Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping*. Princeton University Press.

Braudel, F. (1972). *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. Harper & Row.

Brook, T. (2010). *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties*. Harvard University Press.

Carroll, W.E. (2011). China in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Hegemony, Multi-Polar Balance or Cooperation in Central Asia, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. Vol. 1(19): 1-8.

Chiebuka, A. Q., Oyedele, O. O., & Odike, C. O. (2025). The Belt and Road Initiative: China's Vision for Global Connectivity and Soft Power Influence. *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies*. Vol. 51(1): 262-272.

Ministry of Commerce of China. (2024). *2023 China Foreign Investment Report*. Beijing: Chinese Government Publishing.

Fairbank, J. K., & Goldman, M. (2006). *China: A New History*. Harvard University Press.

Fang, C., & Nolan, P. (2019). *Routledge Handbook of the Belt and Road* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429203039>.

Fang, S. (2024). *The Belt and Road Initiative: Geopolitical Implications for South Asia*. Eva Publishing, Vol. 71(1): 35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7048/71/2025LC0006>

Feng, Y., Feng, F., Xu, Z., Xue, Y., Gao, Y., & Feng, H. (2023). Economic Factors That Underline China's Diplomatic Pursuits in The World. *Lecture Notes in Education, Psychology, and Public Media*. Vol. 37(1): 6-12. <https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7048/37/20240489>.

Frankopan, P. (2015). *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*. Vintage.

Garnaut, R. (2018). *40 Years of Chinese Economic Reform and Development and the Challenge of 50*. In R. Garnaut, Ligang S., and F. Cai (eds), *China's 40 Years of Reform and Development 1978–2018*, ANU Press: Australia.

Garnaut, R., Song, L., Fang, C. (2018). *China's 40 Years of Reform and Development: 1978-2018*. China Update Book Series, ANU Press, Acton, <https://doi.org/10.22459/CYRD.07.2018>.

He, K., & Liu, F. (2021). *China's Peaceful Rise: From Narrative to Practice*. In T. V. Paul, D. W. Larson, H. A. Trinkunas, A. Wivel & R. Emmers (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Peaceful Change in International Relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 445–462.

Huang, X., & Patman, R. (2013). *China and the International System: Becoming a World Power* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203436127>

Jelisavac Trošić, S. (2019). China's accession to the World Trade Organisation: The Process and the Effects. *Megatrend revija*, Vol. 16(1): 173-192. <https://doi.org/10.5937/MegRev1901173J>.



Jia, Q. (2007). The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: China's Experiment in Multilateral Leadership. In I. Akihiro (Ed.), *Eager Eyes Fixed on Eurasia: Russia and Its Eastern Edge*. Slavic Research Centre, Hokkaido University: 113-123.

Keohane, R. O., & Nye, J. S. (2011). *Power and Interdependence*. Longman.

Kızılaslan, T. K. (2023). In Partial Fulfilment of The Requirements For the Degree of Master of Science in the Department of International Relations. Middle East Technical University, Doctoral thesis. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/3122684112>

Kissinger, H. (2011). *On China*. Penguin Books.

Li, X. (2020). The Rise of China and Its Impact on World Economic Stratification and Re-Stratification. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*. Vol. 34(4): 530-550. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2020.1800589>

Li, X., & Wang, Y. (2023). Technological Innovation and Economic Growth in China. *Journal of Asian Economics*. Vol. 45 (2): 110-125.

Lin, Z. (2018). Xi Jinping's 'Major Country Diplomacy': The Impacts of China's Growing Capacity. *Journal of Contemporary China*. Vol. 28 (115): 31-46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1497909>

Liu, D., & Wang, Q. (2008). 改革开放时期邓小平民生思想论略 [A Brief Discussion on Deng Xiaoping's Thoughts on People's Livelihood during the Period of Reform and Opening Up]. *盐城师范学院学报 (人文社会科学版) Journal of Yancheng Education University Humanities & Social Sciences*. Vol. 28(3), 7-11.

Liu, Z. (2015). 亚洲命运共同体的内涵和构建思路 [The Concept and Construction Approach of the Asian Community of Destiny]. *《国际问题研究》 International Studies*. Vol. 4: 40-53.

MacFarquhar, R., & Schoenhals, M. (2006). *Mao's Last Revolution*. Belknap Press.

Mearsheimer, J. J. (2019). *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. Yale University Press.

Meisner, M. (1999). *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic*. Free Press.

MFA. (2025) Holding High the Banner of Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind and Striving for Greater Achievements in Major-Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics. *China* MFA.

https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202501/t20250127_11546599.html

Ministry of Trade of Türkiye. (2024). China Country Profile: Economic Data. October-November 2024. Access address: <https://ticaret.gov.tr>

National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). (2024). China Economic Growth Report 2023. Beijing: NAB Publishing.

Ness, I. & Cope, Z. (2021). The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism. <https://link.springer.com/referencework/10.1007/978-3-030-29901-9#overview>



Pomeranz, K. (2000). *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*. Princeton University Press.

Potter, P. B. (2007). China and the International Legal System: Challenges of Participation. *The China Quarterly*. Vol. 191. 699–715.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20192815>

Rojo, V.R. (2023). The US-China Race for Economic Hegemony in the World-System: Individual and Structural Power from a Network Perspective. Doctoral Thesis, Universidad Camilo José Cela, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgiclfndmkaj/http://repositorio.ucjc.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.12020/1343/Tesis%20Juan%20V%c3%a1zquez%20Final.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1

Sarieddine, T. (2021). Middle Kingdom Enters Middle East: A World-Systems Analysis of Peripheralization along the Maritime Silk Road Initiative. *Journal of World-Systems Research*. Vol. 27(1), 177–201. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jwsr.2021.1027>

Schumpeter, J. A. (1942). *Capitalism, socialism and democracy*. Harper & Brothers.

Silver, B. J. (2020). *Forces of Labour: Workers' Movements and Globalisation Since 1870*. Cambridge University Press.

Silver, B. J., & Slater, E. (1999). The Social Origins of World Hegemonies. *Politics & Society*, Vol. 27 (2): 195-240.

Stoltenberg, C. D. (1984). China's Special Economic Zones: Their Development and Prospects. *Asian Survey*. Vol. 24 (6): 637–654.

Tantri, M.L. (2013). Trajectories of China's Integration with the World Economy through SEZs: A Study of Shenzhen SEZ. *China Report*. Vol. 49 (2): 227-250.

Teekah, E. (2025, January 23). Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shanghai-Cooperation-Organization>

Tyagi, K. (2020). China's Pursuit of Industrial Policy Objectives: Does the WTO (Really) Have an Answer? *Journal of World Trade*, Vol. 54 (4), 615-642.
<https://doi.org/10.54648/trad2020027>

Vogel, E. F. (2011). *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*. Harvard University Press.

Wallerstein, I. (1974). "The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. Vol. 16 (4): 387-415.

Wallerstein, I. (1983). *Historical Capitalism*. London: Verso.

Wallerstein, I. (1984). *The Politics of the World-Economy: The States, the Movements and the Civilisations*. Cambridge University Press.

Wallerstein, I. (2004). *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.



Wang, H., & Liu, J. (2023). *Challenges to China's Economic Sustainability*. China Economic Review. Vol. 50 (3): 130-145.

Wen, J. (2003). Turning Your Eyes to China [Speech transcript]. People's Daily Online. http://en.people.cn/200312/12/eng20031212_130267.shtml

World Bank. (2022). *China's Economic Outlook and Future Projections*. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org>

Xinhua. (2017). 习近平主持召开国家安全工作座谈会 [Xi Jinping presides over a symposium on national security work]. *Xinhua*. https://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-02/17/c_1120486809.htm

Yuan, J. (2010). China's Role in Establishing and Building the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 19 (67): 855-869.

Zhang, D. (2005). The Opportunities and Challenges of China's Joining the World Trade Organisation. *The Chinese Economy*. Vol 38 (2): 5-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10971475.2005.11033520>

Zhang, L. (2023). *The Belt and Road Initiative: China's Path to a New Global Order*. International Affairs. Vol. 99 (1): 70-90.

Zhang, T. (2004). Self-Identity Construction of the Present China. *Comparative Strategy*, Vol 23 (3): 281-301. DOI: 10.1080/01495930490479024

Zhao, S. (2015). China's Power from a Chinese Perspective (I): A Developing Country versus a Great Power. In J. Chung (Ed.), *Assessing China's Power*, Asan-Palgrave Macmillan Series, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. 251-270.

INDONESIA'S STRATEGIC USE OF ASEAN IN BALANCING REGIONAL AND GLOBAL POWER DYNAMICS

HARSH MAHASETH

Hmahaseth@jgu.edu.in / Harshmahaseth95@gmail.com

Associate Professor, Jindal Global Law School, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat (India)
Associate Director, Nehginpao Kipgen Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, O.P. Jindal Global University. ORCID: 0000-0001-7752-5110

FATIMA ZAINAB

fatimazainab92003@gmail.com

Law Student, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh (India)

Abstract

Indonesia, a prominent emerging power in Southeast Asia, occupies a strategically vital position in the Indo-Pacific region. Under former President Joko Widodo, Indonesia embraced the vision of becoming a "Global Maritime Fulcrum" while striving to assert itself as a global political and economic force. This ambition unfolds amidst the evolving and polarised global order, where the Indo-Pacific emerges as a hotspot for geopolitical rivalries, notably between the United States and China. Strategic initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India's Act East Policy, Russia's Turn to the East, and the United States' Pivot to Asia present both opportunities and challenges to Indonesia's pursuit of its national interests. ASEAN serves as Indonesia's diplomatic instrument to navigate these rivalries. By advocating for ASEAN centrality, Indonesia works to prevent member states from aligning exclusively with rival powers, thereby safeguarding regional stability and protecting its national interests. However, the very principle of ASEAN centrality can also limit Indonesia's ability to prioritise its own strategic objectives independently. This paper examines how Indonesia leverages its leadership role in ASEAN to create a regional sphere of influence while simultaneously engaging with global institutions such as the UN, WTO, G-20, and BRICS. Special attention is given to initiatives like the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) that expand ASEAN's strategic reach. The analysis further explores Indonesia's evolving foreign policy under its newly elected leadership in 2024, which signals a more proactive global engagement while maintaining ASEAN at the forefront of its regional strategy. The paper argues that Indonesia's dual commitment to regional and global organisations reveals both opportunities and constraints in its journey to achieving great power status.

Keywords

Indonesia; ASEAN; Indo-Pacific; Emerging Powers; ASEAN Centrality; Regional Influence.

Resumo

A Indonésia, uma potência emergente proeminente no Sudeste Asiático, ocupa uma posição estrategicamente vital na região Indo-Pacífico. Sob o comando do ex-presidente Joko Widodo, a Indonésia abraçou a visão de se tornar um «Pivô Marítimo Global», enquanto se esforçava para se afirmar como uma força política e económica global. Esta ambição desenrola-se no



meio de uma ordem global em evolução e polarizada, onde o Indo-Pacífico surge como um ponto nevrálgico para rivalidades geopolíticas, nomeadamente entre os Estados Unidos e a China. Iniciativas estratégicas como a Iniciativa Cinturão e Rota (BRI) da China, a Política Act East da Índia, a Virada para o Leste da Rússia e a Virada para a Ásia dos Estados Unidos apresentam oportunidades e desafios para a Indonésia na busca de seus interesses nacionais. A ASEAN serve como instrumento diplomático da Indonésia para navegar por essas rivalidades. Ao defender a centralidade da ASEAN, a Indonésia trabalha para impedir que os Estados-membros se alinhem exclusivamente com potências rivais, salvaguardando assim a estabilidade regional e protegendo os seus interesses nacionais. No entanto, o próprio princípio da centralidade da ASEAN também pode limitar a capacidade da Indonésia de priorizar seus próprios objetivos estratégicos de forma independente. Este artigo examina como a Indonésia aproveita seu papel de liderança na ASEAN para criar uma esfera de influência regional e, ao mesmo tempo, se envolver com instituições globais como a ONU, a OMC, o G-20 e o BRICS. É dada especial atenção a iniciativas como a Visão da ASEAN sobre o Indo-Pacífico (AOIP), que ampliam o alcance estratégico da ASEAN. A análise explora ainda mais a evolução da política externa da Indonésia sob a sua liderança recém-eleita em 2024, que sinaliza um envolvimento global mais proativo, mantendo a ASEAN na vanguarda da sua estratégia regional. O artigo argumenta que o duplo compromisso da Indonésia com organizações regionais e globais revela tanto oportunidades quanto restrições em sua jornada para alcançar o status de grande potência.

Palavras-chave

Indonésia; ASEAN; Indo-Pacífico; Potências Emergentes; Centralidade da ASEAN; Influência Regional.

How to cite this article

Mahaseth, Harsh & Zainab, Fatima (2025). Indonesia's Strategic use of Asean in Balancing Regional and Global Power Dynamics. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 106-126. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.6>

Article submitted on 31st May 2025 and accepted for publication on 19th September 2025.





INDONESIA'S STRATEGIC USE OF ASEAN IN BALANCING REGIONAL AND GLOBAL POWER DYNAMICS

HARSH MAHASETH

FATIMA ZAINAB

Introduction

Indonesia, an archipelagic state, is an emerging middle power in an increasingly multipolar world. As the largest country in Southeast Asia and strategically located between the Indian and Pacific oceans, Indonesia occupies a geostrategic position. Being among the founding members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional economic and security grouping of ten Southeast Asian states, Indonesia has established itself as the natural leader of the bloc by consistently playing the role of the "mediator" and "norm-entrepreneur". ASEAN Centrality, a practice to keep ASEAN and its principles at the forefront in deciding the collective interest of the region by the ASEAN member states, has long been a cornerstone of Indonesia's foreign policy. Furthermore, the bloc's commitment to the ASEAN principle of "non-alignment" has played a crucial role in maintaining peace and stability across the Indo-Pacific region.

Acharya (2014) argues that neo-realism and liberal theories fail to take into account "perceptual, ideational and cultural factors" in the study of international relations and only focus on material factors like power and wealth. Drawing on constructivism, he states that the interplay of these non-material factors influences the formulation of foreign policies of security communities like ASEAN. This paper illustrates the constructivist perspective by examining the impact of religio-cultural factors in Indonesia's domestic politics on its foreign policy, particularly in relation to the Rohingya issue and its relations with the US and China. Similar to Acharya, Goh (2013) emphasises the intrinsic social nature of the international system. However, unlike Acharya, who views the regional order in Southeast Asia on the basis of common norms, interests and culture, Goh stresses that the East Asian regional order is shaped by the broader US-led liberal order. Viewing the increasing challenge posed by China and Russia to the US's global hegemony through Goh's lens, the power shift will be framed as "order transition" rather than "power transition". While a power transition implies a forceful attempt by a challenger state to change the global order, potentially through violence, an order transition reflects a more constructive process in which the challenger, hegemon, and other key actors negotiate and adjust without disrupting the overall global framework. Goh's theory is supported by the fact that, to date, no significant power redistribution has occurred, a point that is also acknowledged by Breslin (2013). Breslin states that in the process of re-distribution of power, China will shape its strategy around its identity



as an “emerging power” and will seek “alliances of the dissatisfied” with other distributive-minded states” like the BRICS members, which include Indonesia (Breslin, 2013, p. 617). Hence, in the context of intensifying US-China and US-Russia rivalry, Goh’s theory manifests through initiatives such as China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the imposition of coercive tariffs, efforts to secure new markets, and the increasing significance of multilateral forums like ASEAN and BRICS.

Within this complex environment, Indonesia’s behaviour within ASEAN is typical of middle powers, particularly through its focus on mediating and norm-setting. Middle powers have been defined on the basis of multiple factors like role, capability, function and norms or any or all of them. The “role theory” by Thies and Sari (2018) emphasises the “role” of a middle power, which they define as “ ‘positions’ in an organised group and any socially recognised category of actors, i.e., the kinds of people it is possible to be in a society”(p. 402). Thies and Sari (2018) are of the view that the primary functions of a middle power include backing multilateralism, preserving the established international order, and embodying the qualities of a good international citizen. Anwar (2020) states that Indonesia is a “Kantian middle power,” which is one of the three categories introduced by De Swielande. He explains that middle powers aligned with Kantian principles are defined by their propensity for bridge-building, cooperation, and mediation. They share the “Hobbesian” understanding of an anarchic global arena, yet they interpret this state positively, concentrating on matters of low politics, unlike “Hobbesian” powers, who interpret it negatively and prioritise high politics. Anwar substantiates his argument by emphasising that Indonesia’s promotion of the AOIP is based on the spirit of cooperation rather than competition, reflecting its positive outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Carr (as cited in Abbondanza & Wilkins, 2022) puts forward the idea of middle powers as “norm entrepreneurs,” which means the ability of the state to introduce norms and maintain them in global affairs.

This paper posits that Indonesia's role as a Kantian middle power and a norm entrepreneur has been critical in the Indo-Pacific, contributing significantly to dispute resolution among ASEAN states and the introduction of regional norms, ultimately establishing a strong sphere of influence in the region. This includes drafting and proposal of ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which “provides a guide for ASEAN’s engagement in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions” (ASEAN, 2019, para 21). The paper further argues that while leading regional politics, Indonesia simultaneously interacts with global institutions like the United Nations (UN), G-20, and recently with BRICS. The paper further supports the shift in foreign policy under the newly elected Indonesian President, Mr Prabowo Subianto, highlighting his proactive approach to global engagement and multi-alignment strategy while countering allegations that he is sidelining ASEAN.

The paper concludes that Subianto’s approach to foreign policy can fuel Indonesia’s aspiration to achieve global power status with the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific. Indonesia’s dual commitment to regional and global organisations reveals both opportunities and constraints in its journey to achieving great power status. Subianto’s greatest challenge remains strengthening multilateral ties beyond ASEAN without letting ASEAN fall into irrelevance. A careless zeal to establish a global presence can compromise ASEAN centrality, which has long been a cornerstone of Indonesia’s foreign policy and is



crucial amid geopolitical tensions to maintain regional stability and security. Indonesia's strategy should not be pursuing multi-alignment independently, but as a regional leader, supporting a collective shift within ASEAN from non-alignment to a more coordinated multi-alignment.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative-descriptive approach. The primary sources consist of ASEAN Chair statements, summit communiqués, UN treaties, and G20 declarations. Secondary sources include news reports, academic journal articles, policy papers, and surveys. Specific cases have been selected as representative moments to trace Indonesia's evolving regional and global posture. Indonesia's ASEAN Chairmanship has been examined to evaluate the country's actions and efforts when it is in a position to directly shape ASEAN's agenda. Particular emphasis is placed on the formulation and implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which serves as the key document promoting a collective ASEAN stance in the Indo-Pacific, testing Indonesia's ability to retain regional control amid competing global strategies. Additionally, Indonesia's entry into the BRICS grouping and its participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have been analysed to assess how the country navigates the principle of non-alignment in the context of the intensifying US-China rivalry.

Competing Economic and Security Agendas in the Indo-Pacific

Since the end of World War II, a strategic trend among post-colonial developing nations has been to adopt 'non-alignment' in their foreign policies and regional groupings. ASEAN stands by this principle amid the intensifying US-Russia rivalry and US-China rivalry. The Indo-Pacific region has become a subject of various overlapping and conflicting strategic initiatives of powerful states. The 'Pivot to Asia', initiated under the Obama administration in 2011, shifted the focus of the United States (US) administration to Asia from Europe with the goals of establishing influence in the Indo-Pacific. A major consideration of this policy was to deal with the challenge posed by the emerging power – China. However, the policy yielded little success due to the US's political distractions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Trump, in his first term, failed to have a comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategy, and his second term has been marked by coercive reciprocal tariffs towards all its trade partners. In contrast, Chinese President Xi Jinping continues to pursue his highly ambitious infrastructural initiative called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or New Silk Road, initiated in 2013. The latter has two components: Firstly, 'The Silk Road Economic Belt', which aims to connect China with Europe and secondly, 'Maritime Silk Road', which seeks to connect China with Southeast Asia. As of 2023, over 150 countries have joined the initiative, demonstrating widespread confidence in China's economic vision (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2023).

Similarly, India's 'Act East' policy, launched in 2014 by the Modi government, focused on the larger Indo-Pacific region than its ancestor 'Look East' Policy launched in 1991 by PM Narasimha Rao. Act East Policy remains ASEAN-centric and has been involved specifically in political and security competition under the ASEAN-India Dialogue Relations. In



addition to strategic objectives, India has increasingly employed cultural diplomacy, such as temple restoration and Buddhist linkages, as a tool of soft power to strengthen ties with Southeast Asian states, reinforcing civilizational connections and enhancing its regional presence (Mahaseth et al., 2023). Russia's "Turn to East" emerged after the commencement of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014. In an attempt to move away from the adversarial West, Russia turned to the East to strengthen political and economic cooperation with Asia-Pacific countries and African and Latin American countries. Furthermore, the Indo-Pacific is crowded with overlapping security arrangements. This includes the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (US, India, Australia, Japan) and AUKUS (US, UK, Australia), which undermine the authority of ASEAN by creating parallel strategic frameworks.

While the growing global interest in the Indo-Pacific offers new economic and political opportunities to Southeast Asian states, it also places them in a highly precarious position. In an endeavour to advance individual national interests, ASEAN member states risk aligning with rival global powers, which could place them at odds with each other. In a polarised world, ASEAN Centrality means avoiding exclusive ties with China, the US, or Russia, favouring a unified approach instead.

Indonesia's influence in Southeast Asia and ASEAN

In the context of rising tensions among global powers, ASEAN Centrality serves as a mechanism to prevent the region from being swept up in global rivalries. By mediating between disputing member states and shaping ASEAN's policies, Indonesia fosters a regional sphere of influence in Southeast Asia. While the former characteristic is reflective of Indonesia's existence as a "good international citizen", given by Thies and Sari's theory, and as a "mediator" by Anwar's application of Kantian middle power theory, the latter highlights Indonesia's role as a "norm entrepreneur" as proposed by Carr.

In June 2008, armed conflict between Cambodia and Thailand over the disputed area surrounding the Temple of Preah Vihear prompted Indonesia to intervene in efforts to restore peace in the region. In compliance with the United Nations Security Council's orders, Indonesia, under its ASEAN Chairmanship, hosted an ASEAN Foreign Ministerial Meeting in Jakarta, which was attended by all foreign ministers of ASEAN members on February 22, 2011 (ASEAN, 2011). Regardless of the fact that the meeting ultimately failed to bear fruit and the matter was referred to the International Court of Justice, the event reflected Indonesia's readiness to lead the Indo-Pacific region and also play the role of a mediator to ensure peace between ASEAN members.

In 2023, during its Chairmanship of ASEAN, Indonesia had focused on two major problems in the Indo-Pacific: The Myanmar Crisis and the South China Sea Dispute. Apart from the Rohingya refugee crisis, the takeover of Myanmar by the military junta in 2021 further added to the regional instability in Southeast Asia. In 2021, the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting was hosted by Indonesia, which resulted in the 5-Point Consensus (PC). The latter was a strategic peace plan which aimed to restore stability in Myanmar. The plan included the appointment of a special envoy to the Myanmar military junta and also its engagement with all stakeholders, enabling humanitarian aid, dialogue among parties and calls for putting an immediate end to the violence. While the success of the 5-PC is



debatable, Indonesia's proactive initiatives to address regional problems reflect its capacity to effectively lead the region. Under the Chairmanship of Indonesia in 2023, the 5-PC were reviewed and additional decisions were taken including urging "Myanmar Armed Forces in particular, and all related parties concerned in Myanmar to de-escalate violence and stop targeted attacks on civilians, houses and public facilities, such as schools, hospitals, markets, churches and monasteries" and mobilising "further support from External Partners and the International Community to ASEAN efforts on humanitarian assistance" (ASEAN, 2023a, para. 11& 17).

However, to properly weigh the extent of influence Indonesia possesses within ASEAN, it is important to look into the effect of internal fragmentation of the organisation. For instance, only Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam hold bilateral ties with Myanmar, while the rest of the ASEAN members do not. The varying individual interests have the potential to weaken the regional cohesion. In June 2021, divisions within ASEAN became apparent when several members abstained from voting on a UN General Assembly resolution concerning the deteriorating political atmosphere of Myanmar. The resolution appreciated ASEAN's adoption of the 5-PC and urged its swift implementation while condemning the violence inflicted upon the peaceful demonstrators and calling for an end to the same. Although six ASEAN members voted in favour, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand abstained from voting. Samet (2021) observes that the draft resolution was strongly worded and included a call for a global arms embargo, which has been omitted in the final resolution. It was the Southeast Asian states that had requested, through a letter, to soften the language in order "to make the text acceptable". Hence, the divergence in positions reflects how national economic interests outweigh collective action. As a result, ASEAN is bound to adopt diluted measures to ensure consensus, avoiding harsher steps such as an arms embargo. While this makes the outcome acceptable to all members, it hurts the effectiveness of the action plans.

Another major concern for Southeast Asia is the South China dispute, which dates back to the 1970s. Article 47 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982) states that the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) shall not extend beyond 200 nautical miles from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured. As per Article 56 of UNCLOS (1982), the coastal state has sovereign right of exploring, exploiting, conserving, and managing the natural marine resources located within the exclusive economic zone, among other rights. China, drawing on its historical territories, claims beyond this internationally set limit. The area claimed by China in the South China Sea overlaps with the EEZ of several ASEAN member states and is termed the "Nine-dash Line". In the 1970s, China militarily seized 3 islands beyond its EEZ (Putra, 2015). This military activity was a direct encroachment on the international maritime rights of the neighbouring Southeast Asian Countries, including Brunei, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and also Indonesia, with respect to the Natuna Islands. Subsequently, the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) was signed between ASEAN members and the government of the People's Republic of China on 4th November 2002. The declaration reaffirmed the commitment to principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the UNCLOS, and other universally accepted principles of international law. The declaration also emphasised resolving their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means and not through threat or use of force (ASEAN, 2012).



Regardless, the geopolitical tensions subsist in the South China Sea. China's illegal fishing in Natuna waters has been fiercely retaliated against by Indonesia through military actions in the past. Indonesia, in consonance with its zero-tolerance policy, went as far as renaming its EEZ as the "North Natuna Sea" in 2017, apart from imposing stricter penalties for illegal fishing (Wisnugroho, 2024). In October 2024, after President Subianto came to power, Chinese coast guard vessels were driven out of Indonesian waters twice ("Indonesia says Chinese", 2024). Both President Subianto and former president Joko Widodo (also known as 'Jokowi') share an assertive stance on safeguarding the territorial integrity of Indonesia along with the ASIAN member states against a major power in the region.

Post the DOC, an agreement to implement the DOC was decided upon in 2011. However, almost two decades of negotiations between ASEAN and China have not yielded much. During its ASEAN Chairmanship in 2023, Indonesia called for the acceleration of negotiations under the Code of Conduct (COC), which will be a legally binding document to establish rules around maritime interactions in the South China Sea ("ASEAN Chair Indonesia", 2023) and subsequently, an agreement was reached. The Asean Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) 10+1 Sessions With The Dialogue Partners, ASEAN and China "reaffirmed the aspiration to work towards the early conclusion of an effective and substantive COC ...and adopted the Guidelines for Accelerating the Early Conclusion of an Effective and Substantive Code of Conduct in the South China Sea" (ASEAN, 2023c, para. 70). However, materialisation of the COC remains a distant dream for ASEAN. The lack of an effective action plan once again exposes the fragmentation within ASEAN. Firstly, not all ASEAN states are equally affected by the tensions in the South China Sea. The Philippines and Vietnam have more extensive territorial claims in the disputed waters than Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia. Others remain directly unaffected by the dispute. Secondly, many ASEAN states, particularly those that do not have much at stake, remain reluctant to jeopardise the significant economic opportunities that China provides. In 2012, for instance, despite the clash between a Philippine navy vessel and Chinese fishing vessels at Scarborough Shoal, Cambodia, the then ASEAN chair refused to include the issue in the communique, prompting the Philippines' Foreign Minister to walk out of the summit (York, 2015). More recently, US warships were deployed in support of its ally, the Philippines, following a deadly clash that cost the lives of two Chinese coastal guards (Heydarian, 2025). However, while the progress on the South China Sea issue is slow, it is not completely unachievable, especially through the mediation of relatively stronger economies like Indonesia and Malaysia. Although Indonesia's interest in the South China Sea is confined to the area surrounding the Natuna Islands, its active efforts to address the broader dispute and the trust it has earned from other affected ASEAN members reflect its effective regional leadership. Thies and Sari state that the role of "peacekeeper or intermediary in international conflicts or regional-subsystem collaborator" is an indicator of a "good international citizen". Indonesia's involvement in the Cambodian-Thailand temple dispute, Myanmar crisis and South China dispute reflects this criterion, affirming its role as a good international citizen.

Similarly, Indonesia's efforts to formulate a collective strategy in the Indo-Pacific made the adoption of the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) possible. In terms of timing, AOIP can be viewed as a response to the Western strategic vision put forward by the then US president Donald Trump, who launched Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) in



2017. The need for AOIP arises due to the conflicting interests of the global powers in the region, which could destabilise the region and also risk undermining Indonesia's regional influence. This is reflected by Jokowi's vision of Indonesia as a Global Maritime Fulcrum, which, beyond its emphasis on maritime development, also serves as a reassertion of the nation's presence and power in the region. AOIP had initially faced persistent reluctance by the ASEAN members, and it was only after vigorous lobbying by Indonesia that AOIP was realised on 23rd June, 2019, at the 34th summit of ASEAN in Bangkok. This reflects that while Indonesia holds sufficient influence to introduce new norms in the region, it often finds itself as the sole driver of such norms, as initiatives like AOIP have struggled to garner similar enthusiasm from other member states. There could be two reasons for the latter. Firstly, the growing global interest in the Indo-Pacific might appear as an opportunity to further individual national goals of the particular ASEAN members. Crystallising the AOIP can limit their individual aspirations. Secondly, expanding ASEAN's domain from the narrower Asia-Pacific to wider Indo-Pacific is a slight deviation from the existing status quo, if not the introduction of an entirely new norm. Any such effort is bound to face hindrance as explained by Finnemore and Sikkink (1996) in their 'Norm Life Cycle theory'. ASEAN acknowledged that "economic growth of the region opens up possibilities of cooperation to alleviate poverty and elevate living standards of millions of people," while also in the face of rise of economic and military powers "requires avoiding the deepening of mistrust, miscalculation, and patterns of behaviour based on a zero-sum game"(ASEAN, 2019, para. 1). The key elements of the AOIP are as follows:

A perspective of viewing the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, not as contiguous territorial spaces but as a closely integrated and interconnected region, with ASEAN playing a central and strategic role; An Indo-Pacific region of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry; An Indo-Pacific region of development and prosperity for all; The importance of the maritime domain and perspective in the evolving regional architecture (ASEAN, 2019, para. 10-12).

AOIP cleverly avoids naming any particular major power as the object of concern which is in line with its policy of non-alignment. A key aim, highlighted as one of four, within the AOIP is to enhance the ASEAN Community building process and to fortify current ASEAN-led frameworks like the East Asia Summit. The specific mention of East Asia Summit is significant as it is the only forum that brings the heads of state of global rival powers i.e., China, the US, and Russia on a negotiating plane. Hence, strengthening of EAS can help ease tensions in the Indo-Pacific and avoid potential military or politico-economic confrontations in the region. AOIP, thus, reflects a collective effort of ASEAN to foster Indo-Pacific cooperation and diffuse regional tensions.

Under Indonesia's chairmanship 2023, concrete steps were taken for implementation of the AOIP in contrast with the limited attention it received in previous and subsequent chairmanships (ASEAN, 2023b, para. 38, 28, 29 & 57). The chairman's statement of the 43rd ASEAN Summit welcomed the convening of "ASEAN-Indo Pacific Forum: Implementation of AOIP" in Jakarta, Indonesia and specifically mentioned it as "Indonesia's Initiative" (ASEAN, 2023b, para. 38). Another achievement for AOIP was



the adoption of the ASEAN-New Zealand Joint Statement on Cooperation on the AOIP. The Chairman's statement encouraged adoption of similar Joint Statements with the United States, the Republic of Korea, and China. Furthermore, "ASEAN-Indo-Pacific Workshop on Marine Plastic Debris" was co-hosted by Indonesia and New Zealand in June 2023 and the "EAS Workshop on Developing Coastal Economy" in August 2023 in Bali, Indonesia (ASEAN, 2023b, para. 29). A similar Indo-Pacific Workshop was co-hosted by Indonesia and Australia on the "Use of Technology for Sustainable Aquaculture" in October 2023 in Bali. There was also conversations on the "development of the Concept Paper on the Implementation of the AOIP from a Defence Perspective" (ASEAN, 2023b, para. 57).

Laos further carried Indonesia's spirit regarding AOIP under its Chairmanship in 2024. ASEAN adopted 'ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific' which focussed on improving connectivity specifically through implementation of Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 (MPAC), ensuring sustainable development goals and deepening economic partnerships (ASEAN, 2024a; ASEAN, 2024b). While the AOIP is gradually getting internalised as a norm within ASEAN and has attracted positive engagement by the non-ASEAN partners, its implementation has been limited to areas such as technology, sustainable development and physical connectivity. Little progress has been made with regard to regional security concerns. AOIP neither articulates concrete strategies for managing security concerns with regard to the threat posed by AUKUS and QUAD, nor has ASEAN carried out any substantive action in this regard. Perhaps, over time, with collective and consistent efforts of the ASEAN members, Indonesia's Indo-Pacific vision can be accomplished through effective implementation of the AOIP. If Indonesia manages to continue winning the confidence of non-ASEAN global powers with respect to the AOIP specially on the regional security front, it will not only increase its regional influence, but also bring Indonesia closer to its aspiration of becoming a global power.

Indonesia's Expanding Global Engagement and Representation of ASEAN's Interests

Indonesia has actively been engaged in world affairs through various institutions of global importance like the UN, G-20 and recently BRICS. In the 21st century, global intergovernmental institutions occupy a fundamental role in shaping international policy-making and facilitating both bilateral and multilateral ties between global actors. Indonesia has not only projected its own national interests in the global platforms but also frequently acted as a representative of ASEAN, voicing the region's collective concerns and priorities.

The G-20, a global forum created in 1999, gathers major industrial and developing economies to foster discussions on global economic and financial stability. The G-20 currently consists of 19 member countries and two regional associations which includes China, Russia, United States and the European Union. This intergovernmental organisation includes the world's leading economies, accounting for up to 85% of the world's Gross Domestic Product, and is devoted to solving global economic and financial issues (Overview, n.d.). Indonesia is the only Southeast Asian



nation that has a membership in the G20, giving it the capacity to use the platform not only to forward its interest but also the region's collective interest.

In 2022, under the Indonesian presidency, the G20 Summit focused on three aspects: global health care, sustainable energy transition and digital transformation. The resulting Bali Declaration (G20, 2022) focused on many subjects of interest to the developing South. The declaration reiterated their commitment to supporting the developing countries in responding to global challenges and implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. Moreover, the declaration addressed several key areas, such as food security, climate finance for developing countries to support UN climate objectives, strengthening developing nations' ability to manage future pandemics with support from the World Bank's Financial Intermediary Fund, and ensuring equitable access to medical countermeasures like vaccines, particularly in developing regions.

On July 8, 2022, in Bali, Retno L.P. Marsudi, Indonesia's former foreign Minister, addressed the opening session of the second day of the G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting, emphasising the importance of multilateral cooperation, trust, and bridge-building. Addressing concerns over the Russia-Ukraine war, she brings attention to the unequal impact the developing and low-income states will suffer. She stated that "The voices of all countries – big and small, North and South, developed and developing – must be heard" and proudly announced about the historic first-time invitation extended to representatives of small island developing countries, namely, the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), along with the African Union ("G20 FMM", 2022, para. 12). By offering the opportunity to be heard to the globally neglected island states in the Indo-Pacific, Indonesia not only stands as the champion of the Global South but also attempts to gain more influence in the region and further strengthen Indonesia's vision of the Indo-Pacific.

Marsudi has made a similar appeal at the general debate of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly. Observing that "violation of international law has become a norm in pursuit of narrow self-interest", she brings attention to global problems of climate change, inflation, food, and energy shortages (United Nations, 2022, p. 2). Marsudi stated that geopolitical interests should not be given precedence over global recovery, emphasising the vulnerability of developing states to fall into a potential food & energy crisis. She also expressed her concerns about "mini-lateral groupings", which become instruments of proxy wars between global powers. The term appears to be referring to AUKUS, hence condemning its involvement in the Indo-Pacific, which challenges ASEAN's authority. Marsudi reiterates Indonesia's commitment to "reinforce ASEAN's centrality in shaping regional order in the Indo-Pacific; to forge unity as a locomotive for peace, stability, and prosperity in the region; and to ensure ASEAN matters for our peoples, for the region, and for the world" (United Nations, 2022, p. 6).

In 2008, Indonesia's proposal on the General Expenditure Support Fund aided infrastructural development in the underdeveloped countries through the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Gultom, 2024, p. 119). Furthermore, the reconstruction of the IMF through the Seoul Consensus was supported by Indonesia, which gave equal voting power to developing nations.



Indonesia's recently granted membership in BRICS reflects the growing influence and economic power Indonesia holds in the region. BRICS is an intergovernmental partnership between ten states- Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates. Recently, BRICS has been in the limelight, especially following the controversial and arbitrary tariffs imposed by US President Donald Trump. BRICS challenges the Western-dominated global order as it protects and advances the interests of the Global South, which puts ASEAN's policy of non-alignment and Indonesia's relationship with Western Nations into jeopardy. Trump threatened the BRICS member countries with an additional 10% tariffs if they aligned with "anti-American policies" after the bloc had criticised the tariff war and military attacks on Iran ("Donald Trump threatens", 2025). On the economic front, the largest benefit of this strategic move is access to the New Development Bank, which started with the authorised capital of \$ 100 billion and has a paid-up capital of \$ 50 billion. The Bank holds the capacity to fund large-scale infrastructural projects within Indonesia and could potentially lead to technology transfer. Furthermore, the BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement offers financial assistance to member nations in the face of global liquidity challenges. Membership in BRICS offers Indonesia opportunities to engage more closely with other developing economies, such as India, while expanding access to the Chinese and Russian markets. However, critics argue that Indonesia's participation is largely symbolic (Sulaiman, 2025). In the multilateral institution where strong voices already exist, like that of China and Russia, they claim Indonesia is unlikely to wield significant influence. They argue that the move stems from Subianto's personal ambition of international recognition and does not serve the national interest of Indonesia in any substantive way. It will ultimately be Subianto's test to prove that joining BRICS was worth earning the US's wrath.

Indonesia's deepening friendship with China and the former decision to participate in the BRI along with other Southeast Asian States has also been a subject of concern for ASEAN. Under Jokowi, Indonesia became part of this ambitious initiative to fund the infrastructural development, such as roadways, railways, ports, etc., within Indonesia. China has invested over a trillion dollars in various countries through the BRI, and Indonesia has been among its largest trading partners. There has been an increasing concern regarding the BRI loans being predatory towards developing countries, as the BRI offers loans at significantly higher interest rates compared to those provided by the World Bank. The financial assistance provided by both the World Bank and China can be categorised into aid-financed and debt-financed. The World Bank offers aid financed through the International Development Association (IDA) to countries that are below the annually updated threshold calculated through Gross National Income (GNI) per capita on more concessional interest rates. Relatively richer countries are debt-financed through the World Bank's International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) with near-market interest rates. Cheong (2022), in his study, categorises China's development finance flows into similar categories as provided by the World Bank. Drawing on AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance (GCDF) dataset, he finds that aid-financed loans from China carry interest rates that are 1.5% higher, while debt-financed loans have interest rates that are approximately 0.8% higher. Some accuse China of "debt-trap diplomacy," where it will seize the collateral assets of poorer nations unable to pay back, while others believe that China may not use coercive strategies but



aims at subduing the sovereignty of poorer nations (Clark, 2023). The latter accusation is based on the leasing of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port for 99 years to China due to the latter's inability to repay the loan. The absence of transparency in the financial transactions between China and its debtors leaves room for doubt on the credibility and viability of the debt-trap theory.

As of December 2023, there were around seventy-one BRI projects with a combined valuation of \$20.3 billion (Busbarat et al., 2023). The Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway is an example of a highly successful BRI project costing \$7.3 billion, of which approximately 75% was covered through a loan by China Development Bank ("Indonesia Launches", 2023). In September 2023, Jokowi invited Chinese firms to invest in the building of \$32 billion new capital, Nusantara ("Indonesia China Discuss", 2023). The growing dependency on China risks compromising Indonesia's previously held firm stance on the contentious South China Sea issue. A diminished voice on such a critical matter can also weaken Indonesia's image as a strong and independent regional leader.

The Way Forward: Jokowi's passive 'Non-alignment' or Subianto's active 'Multi-alignment'

Non-alignment has been a successful political strategy for many post-colonial states during the bipolar Cold War era. After the fall of the Soviet Union in the late 1990s, the US-led liberal world order came to dominate global politics. However, with the recent rise of China and resurgence of Russia, the global sphere is transitioning into a multipolar world order. In light of these geopolitical changes, traditional non-alignment seems increasingly inefficient, giving way to an evolved approach known as the "multi-alignment" strategy, which has attracted significant attention from policymakers. While the line that separates the two strategies is quite thin, the primary difference between the two appears to be simultaneously aligning with all rival global powers on economic, political and military fronts in case of multi-alignment. The multi-alignment strategy relies on both bilateral and multilateral relationships, with multilateral platforms playing a key role by facilitating collaboration between rival powers and pacifying hostilities. Prabowo Subianto seems to adopt a multi-alignment strategy, in contrast to Jokowi's approach of strict non-alignment.

It is also important to note that Indonesia's foreign policy has never been completely independent of its domestic politics. The domestic political dynamics not only shapes what happens within Indonesia but also influences how the country interacts with the world. Hence, the public perception of the Global powers like China and US matters for the ruling parties to frame domestically acceptable foreign policies. "Economic growth" has consistently remained a key focus of Indonesia's domestic agenda, creating a sense of continuity between both Jokowi's and Subianto's domestic policy. Furthermore, as the largest Muslim majority democracy, Indonesia's foreign policy is also influenced by the Islamic values and a sense of global Muslim solidarity. For example, the Pew Global Attitudes survey found that Indonesian public hostility toward the U.S. increased after the Iraq invasion but decreased when U.S. aid arrived following the devastating 2004 tsunami (Wike, 2006). Similarly, Indonesia's strong stance against Myanmar's military



rule reflects a deep sense of brotherhood with the persecuted Rohingya Muslim community.

Jokowi's tenure is characterised by "pro-people diplomacy" where domestic interests are placed at the centre of foreign policy decisions. This means that goal of the foreign policy should be to advance domestic interests. The populist leader, in his first term, focussed on three aspects with respect to its foreign policy: maintaining Indonesia's sovereignty, enhancing the protection of Indonesian citizens, and intensifying economic diplomacy (Indonesian Cabinet Secretariat, 2015). Aligning foreign policy closely with economic development objectives, the then Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi argued that Indonesia would favour bilateral mechanisms over multilateral approaches as a diplomatic instrument (Andika, 2016). This approach is reflected in Jokowi's lack of active participation in the UN General Assembly and actions such as sinking illegal fishing vessels from fellow ASEAN members.

Jokowi's ambitious goal of making Indonesia as a Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) found no mention in his second term. GMF stood on five pillars which are to "rebuild maritime culture, manage marine resources, develop maritime infrastructure and connectivity, advance maritime diplomacy, and boost maritime defense forces" (Laksmana, 2017, para. 2). The reason for the GMF falling into irrelevance is attributed to poorly-designed vision to bureaucratic hurdles in its implementation (Laksmana, 2019). In his second term, Jokowi has focused more on his domestic policy and entrusted the foreign policy to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Jokowi in his foreign policy, stood by Indonesia's longstanding principle of passive non-alignment and neutrally between global power rivals. He focussed less on the multilateral fora, if not completely abandoned them, despite its potential to serve as a concrete platform for pursuing multi-alignment foreign policy. His limited engagement in multilateral settings, along with a preference for bilateral ties with global powers, was largely driven by Indonesia's domestic priorities. For example, Priamarizki (2024) observes that Indonesia's participation in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), launched by President Biden in 2022 with 13 partner countries, was primarily motivated by the desire to "increase trade and investment opportunities, especially for Indonesia's raw materials industries" (p. 29). However, despite fostering closer economic ties with the U.S., Jokowi remained distant from Western-led security arrangements such as the Quad and AUKUS, as they did not align with domestic interests.

Similarly, he notes that Jokowi's participation in China's BRI was motivated by his domestic goal of improving infrastructural development within Indonesia. However, BRI projects have generated significant public grievances, which risk reigniting longstanding anti-Chinese sentiment. BRI projects largely employed Chinese workers, limiting opportunities for local employment and skill transfer. Public frustration was further exacerbated when, during the COVID-19 pandemic, mass layoffs of Indonesian workers occurred while Chinese workers retained their jobs in Chinese firms, prompting the administration to delay some Chinese work permits (Suryadinata, 2020). This discontent is reflected in a Pew Research Center survey, which showed a drop in favorable views toward China from 66% in 2014 to 53% in 2018 (Tamir & Budiman, 2019). Although Jokowi's administration did not witness this discontent materialize into acts of violence,



it now poses a challenge for his successor, Prabowo Subianto, in navigating Sino-Indonesian relations amid growing public disapproval.

Prabowo Subianto came into power in October 2024. Unlike Jokowi, Subianto has a strong background in both business and the military. His domestic policy includes increasing economic growth from 5% to 8%, 28 billion dollar "Free Nutritious Meal" Programme, improving revenue to GDP ratio and continuing the \$ 32 billion capital city relocation project ("What policies to expect", 2024). Unlike Jokowi, Subianto's administration has not clearly linked domestic policy with foreign policy, suggesting that his approach may allow for greater flexibility in foreign affairs, rather than being largely driven by domestic politics.

Subianto has utilised both bilateral and multilateral forums. Indonesia under Subianto has taken a more proactive approach towards world politics, evidenced by his visits to 13 countries, including both China and the United States. The trip to Beijing brought home deals worth 10 billion dollars and also invited controversy over the Joint Statement issued between China and Indonesia on 'Advancing the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the China-Indonesia Community with a Shared Future'. The Joint Statement stated that the "two sides reached an important common understanding on joint development in areas of overlapping claims" and mentioned the establishment of the "Inter-Governmental Joint Steering Committee" to explore and advance cooperation ("Joint Statement Between", 2024, p. 10). Subianto was thus criticised for potentially undermining Indonesia's territorial sovereignty by setting a drastic shift to the former unyielding position of Indonesia with regards to the South China Sea. Indonesia, shortly thereafter, issued a clarification of its position, declaring its non-recognition of China's claims in the South China Sea. (Widiyanto, 2024). The inconsistency in Indonesia's statement can affect its credibility as the regional leader and bring distrust from Southeast Asian states, specifically those who has an interest in the South China Sea. However, on the positive note, both the countries reaffirmed their commitment to implementation of the DOC, and "early conclusion" of COC ("Join Statement Between", 2024, p. 10-11).

Post-China visit Subianto directly flew to Washington DC to meet President Joe Biden, attempting to uphold the Indonesian foreign policy of non-alignment. The globally active President plans to visit Russia in June 2025 to strike a free trade agreement with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (Shofa, 2025). The Union, in addition to Russia, consists of 4 post-Soviet states - Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan. This could enable Indonesia to access alternative markets to US in response to increased tariffs imposed under Trumps Administration. Russia and Indonesia have also held Naval drills in the Indonesian waters – an action which could be unsettling for ASEAN members, given Russia's has continuously undermined of international law in the context of Russian-Ukrainian war ("Russia, ASEAN hold first", 2021). Indonesia followed up with naval military drills with Australia and had earlier hosted its annual 'Super Garuda Shield' drill with the United States (Mahdi, 2025). This, once again, appears to reflect Indonesia's adherence to its long-standing policy of non-alignment. It is under Subianto's leadership that Indonesia has become a member of BRICS and aspires to be part of two transnational economic groupings: the "[Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development](#) (OECD)" and the "[Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-](#)



[Pacific Partnership](#)" ("Indonesia Formally Requests," 2024, para 2; "Ministers welcome Roadmap" , 2024).

Subianto has been criticised for alleged sidelining of ASEAN Centrality, with critics contending that his administration's actions reflect a departure from this longstanding principle. This is evidenced by his initial foreign trips to South Asia, the Middle East, North America and South America rather than to neighbouring ASEAN members states. This symbolically sends an indication that Subianto's preference of pursue national interests over upholding ASEAN unity. Furthermore, the absence of the Foreign Minister Sugiono from the meeting hosted by Thailand to discuss the implementation of ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar – attended by 5 other ASEAN founder states – has been cited as further evidence of disregard towards ASEAN. However, while there are certain shortcomings in Subianto's administration, the claim that the latter is sidelining ASEAN appears premature and somewhat overstated.

Subianto's intention to keep ASEAN at the forefront is clearly reflected in his engagements on the global stage. The Joint Statement by President Biden and President Prabowo Subianto of Indonesia affirmed that they were committed to an "open, transparent, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific regional architecture with ASEAN at the center" ("Joint Statement by President", 2024, para. 3). The Joint Statement between China and the Indonesia, previously referred to, support "strengthening the ASEAN-led cooperation mechanisms in order to build an open, transparent and inclusive regional architecture with ASEAN at its center" and promotion of mutually beneficial BRI and AOIP ("Joint Statement Between", 2024, p. 13). Similarly, after the State visit to India, the India-Indonesia joint Statement promised "to strengthen efforts towards implementation of the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity" and "support for ASEAN Centrality" in the evolving regional architecture (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2025, paras. 44- 47). Furthermore, the carefully calculated strategizing of foreign trips and joint military drills indicates that Subianto does not intend to exclusively align with any single global power. Subianto's proactive approach to world affairs is a shift to a more effective model of "multi-alignment," and it does not contradict ASEAN's non-alignment policy.

Perhaps, the best way forward for Subianto is guide ASEAN into adopting a multi-alignment framework. This would involve transitioning ASEAN's traditional non-alignment stance into a more dynamic multi-alignment approach through ASEAN's institutional mechanisms. In practice, this will require the Southeast Asian states to collectively define the principles and other specifics of a coordinated multi-alignment policy, with Indonesia playing the lead in the process. Surely, a significant challenge will be to aligning varying national interests of different members, however, it is not unfeasible with Indonesia's regional influence and leadership capacity. This move will also help dispel allegations on Indonesia that it is deviating from principle of ASEAN Centrality.

Conclusion

Indonesia, an archipelagic Kantian middle power and norm entrepreneur, endeavours to carve out a prominent role among global powers in an increasingly multi-polar world order. Its geostrategic placement, nestled between the Indian and Pacific oceans, means



it faces a convergence of frequently opposing geopolitical strategies, offering both potential benefits and significant challenges. Having created a region of influence in the Indo-Pacific and projecting itself as the founding leader of ASEAN on the global stage, Indonesia's ongoing challenge is to sustain this influence and leadership. By participating in international platforms like UN, G-20, and BRICS, Indonesia invites economic and political opportunities not only for itself but for the region as a whole.

With the ascent of Subianto to power, Indonesia's foreign policy deviates from Jokowi's more reserved stance on global affairs. Under Subianto's leadership, Indonesia aims to strengthen bilateral ties with all the major global powers. The increasing global engagements will help attract much-needed investments into Indonesia. BRI has successfully financed numerous infrastructure projects within Indonesia. However, overreliance on foreign loans can jeopardise Indonesia's independence. Therefore, such financial engagements must be approached with caution.

Under Subianto, Indonesia is shifting its from passive non-alignment to active multi-alignment. A well-calibrated multi-alignment strategy will enable Indonesia to maximise its national interests without losing its bargaining power. In the multi-polarising world, there is a need for Southeast Asian states must move beyond post-World War non-alignment movement and to engage with all major global actors. Through the implementation of AOIP, Indonesia can embed a multi-alignment policy within the framework of ASEAN itself. ASEAN should not be seen as a barrier to Indonesia's aspiration of becoming a global power. Instead, if leveraged correctly, it can become a vehicle to realize those ambitions.

References

Abbondanza, G., & Wilkins, T. S. (Eds.). (2022). *Awkward Powers: Escaping Traditional Great and Middle Power Theory*. Springer Singapore. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-0370-9>

Acharya, A. (2014). *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (3rd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315796673>

Andika, M. T. (2016). An Analysis of Indonesia Foreign Policy Under Jokowi's Pro-People Diplomacy. *Indonesian Perspective*, 1(2), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.14710/ip.v1i2.14284>

Anwar, D. F. (2020). Indonesia and the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific. *International Affairs*, 96(1), 111–129. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz223>

ASEAN chair Indonesia to intensify talks on code for South China Sea. (2023, February 4). Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/asean-chair-indonesia-intensify-talks-code-south-china-sea-2023-02-04/>

ASEAN. (2011). *Statement by the Chairman of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) following the Informal Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of ASEAN, Jakarta, 22 February 2011*. <https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/documents/N110222.pdf>



ASEAN. (2012). *Declaration On The Conduct Of Parties In The South China Sea*. <https://asean.org/declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2/>

ASEAN. (2019). *Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf

ASEAN. (2023a). *ASEAN Leaders' Review And Decision On The Implementation Of The Five-Point Consensus*. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/01.FINAL-ASEAN-LEADERS-REVIEW-AND-DECISION-ON-THE-IMPLEMENTATION-OF-THE-5PC-1.pdf>

ASEAN. (2023b). *Chairman's Statement of the 43rd ASEAN Summit Jakarta, Indonesia, 5 September 2023*. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CHAIRMAN-STATEMENT-OF-THE-43RD-ASEAN-SUMMIT-FIN.pdf>

ASEAN. (2023c). *Chairman's Statement The Asean Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) 10+1 Sessions With The Dialogue Partners And Trilateral Meetings*. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-PMC-101-with-DPs-and-Trilateral-.pdf>

ASEAN. (2024a). *Chairman's Statement Of The 44th And 45th Asean Summits Vientiane, Lao Pdr, 9 October 2024*. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Final_Chairmans-Statement-of-the-44th-and-45th-ASEAN-Summits-1.pdf

ASEAN. (2024b). *Asean Leaders' Declaration On The Asean Outlook On The Indo-Pacific For The Future-Ready Asean And Asean-Centred Regional Architecture*. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/3-Final_ALD-on-the-AOIP-for-the-Future-Ready-ASEAN-and-ASEAN-Centered-Regional-Architecture.pdf

Breslin, S. (2013). *China and the global order: signalling threat or friendship?* *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, 89(3), 615–634. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23473846>

Busbarat, W., et al. (2023). *How Has China's Belt and Road Initiative Impacted Southeast Asian Countries?* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/12/how-has-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-impacted-southeast-asian-countries?lang=en>

Cheong (2022, September 16). *Chinese 'Debt Traps' in Southeast Asia: What the Data Say*. Fulcrum. <https://fulcrum.sg/chinese-debt-traps-in-southeast-asia-what-the-data-say/>.

Clark, N. (2023, April 6). *The Rise and Fall of the BRI*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/rise-and-fall-bri>

Donald Trump threatens 'un-American' BRICS countries with 10 percent tariff. (2025, July 7). Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/7/donald-trump-threatens-un-american-brics-countries-with-10-percent-tariff>

Finnemore, M., & Sikkink, K. (1998). *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change*. *International Organization*, 52(4), 887–917. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2601361>



G20 (2022). *G20 Bali Leaders' Declaration*. <https://g20.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/2022-11-16-g20-declaration-data.pdf>.

G20 FMM: Opening speech of Indonesian Foreign Minister (2022, July 8). The Jakarta Post. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2022/07/08/g20-fmm-opening-speech-of-indonesian-foreign-minister.html>.

Goh, E. (2013). *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy, and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia*. (1 ed.) Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199599363.001.0001>

Gultom, Y. S. M. (2024). Indonesia As Representative Of The Global South In G20 Presidency: Return Of Global Solidarity. *PIR Journal*, 9(1), 113-125. <https://www.doi.org/10.22303/pir.1.1.2021.01-10>

Heydarian, H.J. (2025, August 14). *A South China Sea collision brings US-Philippines alliance to the fore*. The Interpreter. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/south-china-sea-collision-brings-us-philippines-alliance-fore>

Indonesia formally requests to join Trans-Pacific trade pact. (2024, September 25). Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-formally-requests-join-trans-pacific-trade-pact-2024-09-25/>

Indonesia Launches 142-km Jakarta To Bandung Bullet Train, \$7.3 Billion HSR Line Funded And Developed By China As Part Of BRI. (2023, October 2). Swarajya. <https://swarajyamag.com/news-brief/indonesia-launches-142-km-jakarta-to-bandung-high-speed-railway-line-73-billion-project-funded-and-developed-by-china-as-part-of-bri>

Indonesia says Chinese coast guard ship driven from disputed waters. (2024, October 24). The Jakarta Post. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2024/10/24/indonesia-says-chinese-coast-guard-ship-driven-from-disputed-waters.html>.

Indonesia, China discuss boost to investment and trade. (2023, September 8). Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-china-discuss-boost-investment-trade-2023-09-08/>

Indonesian Cabinet Secretariat (2015) *Indonesia's Foreign Policy Priorities in 5 Year Ahead*, Sekretaris Kabinet. <https://setkab.go.id/en/indonesias-foreign-policy-priorities-in-5-years-ahead/>

Joint Statement Between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Indonesia on Advancing the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the China-Indonesia Community with a Shared Future. (2024, Nov 9). CGTN. https://news.cgtn.com/news/files/Joint_Statement_between_China_and_Indonesia.pdf

Joint Statement by President Biden and President Prabowo Subianto Djojohadikusumo of Indonesia—Commemorating 75 Years of Diplomatic Relations. (2024, November 12). The American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/joint-statement-president-biden-and-president-prabowo-subianto-djojohadikusumo-indonesia>.



Laksmana, E. (2017, March 23). *Indonesian Sea Policy: Accelerating Jokowi's Global Maritime Fulcrum?*. Centre for Strategic & International Studies. <https://amti.csis.org/indonesian-sea-policy-accelerating/>

Laksmana, E. (2019, November 8). *Indonesia as "Global Maritime Fulcrum": A Post-Mortem Analysis*. Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. <https://amti.csis.org/indonesia-as-global-maritime-fulcrum-a-post-mortem-analysis/>

Mahaseth, H., A. Srivastava, and T. Rai. (2023). Temple Diplomacy and India's Soft Power: A Cultural Approach to Diplomacy in South-East Asian States. *India Review*, 22(1), 28-42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2022.2142758>

Mahdi, D. (2025, April 9). *Exercises with Russia undermine Indonesia's commitment to international law*. The Strategist. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/joint-naval-exercises-with-russia-undermine-indonesias-commitment-to-international-law/>

Ministers welcome Roadmap for accession discussions with Indonesia. (2024, May 2). Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/news/press-releases/2024/05/ministers-welcome-roadmap-for-accession-discussions-with-indonesia.html?>

Ministry of External Affairs. (2025, January 26). *India-Indonesia Joint Statement on the State Visit of H.E. Prabowo Subianto, President of Republic of Indonesia (23-26 January 2025)*. <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/38944/IndiaIndonesia+Joint+Statement+on+the+State+Visit+of+HE+Prabowo+Subianto+President+of+Republic+of+Indonesia+2326+January+2025>.

Priamarizki, A. (2024). Understanding the Domestic Determinants of Indonesia's Hedging Policy towards the United States and China. *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 46(1), 19-42. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/925574>.

Putra, B. A. (2015). Indonesia's Leadership Role in ASEAN: History And Future Prospects. *IJASOS- International E-Journal of Advances in Social Sciences*, 1(2), 188. <https://doi.org/10.18769/ijasos.82584>.

Russia, ASEAN hold first naval drills off Indonesian coast. (2021, December 1). Jakarta Post. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2021/12/01/russia-asean-hold-first-naval-drills-off-indonesian-coast-.html>.

Samet, O. (2021, June 22). *There is No ASEAN Consensus on Myanmar*. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/there-is-no-asean-consensus-on-myanmar/>

Shofa (2025, May 19). *Prabowo to Visit Russia in June, Eyes Eurasian Bloc Trade Pact Signing*. Jakarta Globe. <https://jakartaglobe.id/business/prabowo-to-visit-russia-in-june-eyes-eurasian-bloc-trade-pact-signing>

State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (2023). *The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future*. China's State Council. http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/zfbps_2279/202310/t20231010_773734.html

Sulaiman, Y. (2025, March 6). *Indonesia's BRICS accession underscored by Prabowo's self interest*. East Asia Forum. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/03/06/indonesias-brics-accession-underscored-by-prabowos-self-interest/#subscribe>



Suryadinata, L. (2020). Tensions in Indonesia over Chinese Foreign Workers during COVID-19 Pandemic. *ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute*, 73, 1-7.

https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_73.pdf.

Tamir, C. And Budiman, A. (2019, April 4). *Indonesians optimistic about their country's democracy and economy as elections near*. Pew Research Center.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/04/04/indonesians-optimistic-about-their-countrys-democracy-and-economy-as-elections-near/>

Thies, C. G., & Sari, A. C. (2018). A Role Theory Approach to Middle Powers: Making Sense of Indonesia's Place in the International System. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 40(3), 397-421. <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs40-3c>

United Nations. (2022, September 26). *Statement By Her Excellency Retno L.P. Marsudi Minister For Foreign Affairs Of The Republic Of Indonesia At The General Debate Of The 77th Session Of The UN General Assembly*.

https://estatemnts.unmeetings.org/estatemnts/10.0010/20220926/o2HXfwNDXN6v/zUV2qC5eaBoU_en.pdf

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, December 10, 1982.

https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf

What policies to expect from Indonesia's new President Prabowo. (2024, October 18).

Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/what-policies-expect-indonesias-new-president-prabowo-2024-10-18/>

Widianto, S. (2024, November 11). *Indonesia says it has no overlapping South China Sea claims with China, despite deal*. Reuters.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-says-it-has-no-overlapping-south-china-sea-claims-with-china-despite-2024-11-11/>

Wike, R. (2006, November 16). *Bush Visits Indonesia*. Pew Research Center.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2006/11/16/bush-visits-indonesia/>

Wisnugroho, A. M. (2024, June 22). *South China Sea Conflict: Indonesia's Goals and Strategies Through the 'ABC Triangle Conflict Model.'* Modern Diplomacy.

<https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/06/22/south-china-sea-conflict-indonesias-goals-and-strategies-through-the-abc-triangle-conflict-model/>

York, M. (2015). ASEAN's Ambiguous Role in Resolving South China Sea Disputes.

Indonesian Journal of International Law, 12(3), 286-310. <https://doi.org/10.17304/ijil.vol12.3.607>

TÜRKIYE'S COUNTER-TERRORISM STRATEGY IN AFRICA: A REGIONAL INSTITUTIONALISED GOVERNANCE OF FOREIGN POLICY IN THE LIGHT OF GLOBAL POWER COMPETITIONS

TOUAZI ILAS

ilas.touazi@lecnam.net

Conservatoire national des arts et métiers, Cnam, Paris (France) Doctoral school 'Abbé Grégoire',
Paris Laboratory: Security & Defence Team - Intelligence, Criminology, Crises, Cyberthreats

Abstract

Türkiye's African counter-terrorism policy is one of the key instruments of its foreign policy in a post-Cold War multipolar world that has been conceptualised in terms of "regional leadership" in its quest for status on the world political scene. A multidirectional and multidimensional strategy, combining hard and soft power, has thus been embarked upon in a new drive for institutionalised long-term relations through regional and sub-regional governance within the framework of the African Union. The main objective of this study was, therefore, to explore the institutionalised regional governance of Turkish foreign policy and to understand and identify the variables that determine its counter-terrorism strategy in Africa in the context of competition between global powers. Indeed, Turkish counter-terrorism diplomacy is committed to building enhanced institutional bonds with African countries as an important component of its security foreign policy cooperation, which, on one hand, reflects a backdrop of continuing instability on the continent caused by the growing transnational terrorist threat from jihadist groups affiliated to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. On the other hand, Türkiye's growing security footprint in Africa as a key player, asserting an increasingly active position, is rooted in a perspective of regional rivalry with the rise of emerging countries and the global south as the main alternative adversaries of the West in a region of geostrategic importance for the world's major powers.

Keywords

Turkish Foreign Policy, Counter-Terrorism Strategy, Regional Institutionalised Governance, African Union, Global Power Competitions.

Resumo

A política antiterrorista da Turquia em África é um dos instrumentos fundamentais da sua política externa num mundo multipolar pós-Guerra Fria, que foi concebida em termos de «liderança regional» na busca por estatuto na cena política mundial. Uma estratégia multidirecional e multidimensional, combinando *hard* e *soft power*, foi assim empreendida numa nova iniciativa para relações institucionalizadas de longo prazo através da governação regional e sub-regional no âmbito da União Africana. O principal objetivo deste estudo foi, portanto, explorar a governação regional institucionalizada da política externa turca e compreender e identificar as variáveis que determinam a sua estratégia antiterrorista em África no contexto da competição entre potências globais. A diplomacia antiterrorista turca



está empenhada em construir laços institucionais reforçados com os países africanos como uma componente importante da sua cooperação em matéria de política externa de segurança, o que, por um lado, reflete um contexto de instabilidade contínua no continente causada pela crescente ameaça terrorista transnacional de grupos jihadistas afiliados à Al-Qaeda e ao Estado Islâmico. Por outro lado, a crescente presença da Turquia em África como um ator-chave, afirmando uma posição cada vez mais ativa, está enraizada numa perspetiva de rivalidade regional com a ascensão dos países emergentes e do sul global como os principais adversários alternativos do Ocidente numa região de importância geoestratégica para as principais potências mundiais.

Palavras-chave

Política Externa Turca, Estratégia Antiterrorista, Governança Regional Institucionalizada, União Africana, Competições de Poder Global.

How to cite this article

Ilas, Touazi (2025). Türkiye's Counter-Terrorism Strategy in Africa: A Regional Institutionalised Governance of Foreign Policy in the Light of Global Power Competitions. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 127-148. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.7>

Article submitted on 02nd June 2025 and accepted for publication on 06th September 2025.





TÜRKIYE'S COUNTER-TERRORISM STRATEGY IN AFRICA: A REGIONAL INSTITUTIONALISED GOVERNANCE OF FOREIGN POLICY IN THE LIGHT OF GLOBAL POWER COMPETITIONS

TOUAZI ILAS

Introduction

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan came to power in 2003; Türkiye's foreign policy (TFP) has been completely redefined to enable Africa to become a key partner in the global geopolitical arena. As an emerging power, Türkiye has significantly expanded its influence in political, cultural, economic, and military domains, leveraging both hard and soft power through diplomatic, humanitarian, and religious activism involving anti-jihadist operations. Simultaneously, Türkiye has embarked on a dynamic and proactive 'third way' partnership process, which constitutes an alternative model of cooperation to that of the main traditional partners on the African continent (Toulemonde, 2023). The article, therefore, focuses on Türkiye's counter-terrorism strategy in Africa as institutionalised regional governance of foreign policy in light of global rivalries between major powers. In this regard, Turkish African policy is a double game between national experiences and international cooperation policies in the fight against terrorism, namely the role of Turkish foreign policy as an influential regional actor in Africa and an emerging power, which has resulted in enhanced cooperation at the sub-regional, trans-regional and international levels in the fight against terrorism.

The analysis attempts to answer a crucial question on Türkiye's counter-terrorism strategies towards Africa as an emerging power to prevent jihadist threats through regional and international institutional architectures in the context of competition between major powers. In a way, this study seeks to provide satisfactory answers to the main guiding questions:

What are the main characteristics of Türkiye's counter-terrorism strategies in Africa as a cornerstone of its foreign policy in light of global power competitions?

How does Türkiye's counter-terrorism strategy in Africa align with the framework of regional institutional governance?

What are the challenges and limitations of Türkiye's counter-terrorism policy in Africa?

The underlying hypotheses that will be tested throughout the study focus on the common thread of the interdependent variables that analyse the decision-making process in Turkish anti-terrorist policies in Africa as a component of its foreign and security policy during the period following the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), through strategies mixing hard and soft measures. Mainly explained by its national and international



experience, this has resulted in a new institutionalised governance engineering in the fight against terrorism, with the strengthening of regional and international cooperation in a context of competition between major powers.

The study focuses on a triangular process mainly based on the description, explanation and analysis of various Turkish anti-terrorism policies in Africa within the framework of the interrelation of hard and soft strategies. In addition, the article was supported by a theoretical "intermestic approach" that reflects the overlap between national imperatives and international dynamics in the era of globalisation (Kurniawati, 2017, p.147), where foreign policy in general and counter-terrorism cooperation in particular are halfway between the local and the global.

The research is inevitably interdisciplinary and strengthened by literature in the fields of foreign policy, security studies and counter-terrorism, as well as political science and international relations. The study will focus on Türkiye's counter-terrorism strategy in Africa within the framework of institutionalised regional governance of foreign policy; thus, the analysis was consolidated by exploring primary sources and secondary research data (Ajayi, 2025, p.1) with key publications such as reports, journals, articles, and academic works.

The objective of this study is to analyse the various determinants of Turkish foreign policy towards Africa, namely to refine the understanding of Türkiye's counter-terrorism strategies based on an integrated overview that includes soft and hard measures, as well as the actors, factors and institutions that influence its main orientations, particularly within the framework of the African Union. Meanwhile, the article aims to identify the key elements of regional and international cooperation between Türkiye and Africa in the fight against terrorism in the context of rising geostrategic rivalry between the major powers. However, the study is not limited to an analysis of Türkiye's counter-terrorism policies in Africa but also examines the current regional context of the hybrid jihadist threat, thereby enabling a 'holistic approach' that includes non-traditional aspects of coordination and cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

The study methodology will provide a privileged perspective for analysis, primarily through a systemic approach, describing the complexity and explaining the interactions between the various components (Belleville, 2019) and factors that have strongly impacted Türkiye's counter-terrorism strategy in the African porous environment characterised by the spread of jihadist networks (inputs) and the dynamics of a multidimensional set of interacting actors of anti-terrorism at the national and regional levels (outputs), then cooperation policies of anti-terrorism under institutionalised governance as feedback in light of global power competitions. Indeed, Turkish hard power and security cooperation in Africa have seen increased engagement, particularly in counter-terrorism operations through military and defence commitments, defence agreements, drone diplomacy, military footholds via training facilities intended to bolster the struggle against terrorism, and the deployment of private military mercenaries to tackle the security threats posed by transnational terrorism (Kamal, 2025). This trend is apparent in factual data concerning Türkiye's defence and aerospace exports in 2023, reaching an unprecedented peak of \$5.5 billion, showing a 27% surge for Turkish drones, which have emerged as specialised instruments in combating terrorism when confronted



by rebellious jihadist groups, particularly in countries such as Togo, Niger, Nigeria, and Somalia (ADF, 2024). Alongside the militarised and securitised approach of Türkiye's foreign policy in Africa regarding counter-terrorism, soft power has been employed (Oğuzlu, 2007, p.92), notably via structured humanitarian diplomacy with the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA). This agency has grown into a vital actor in charitable assistance and development projects, economic and technical partnerships with African nations within the educational sphere, and infrastructure projects, particularly in Somalia (Haşimi, 2014, p.135-136), thereby enhancing abilities to counter terrorism and prevent violent extremism.

The article is organised as follows. First, it is devoted to understanding the Turkish foreign policy as an emerging power in global politics. Then it examines Türkiye's Africa policy roadmap endowed with a new dynamic perception of a hegemonic regional power. After that, Türkiye's counter-terrorism strategy in Africa has been highlighted in particular through the regional institutional governance and the double game of hard and soft approaches. Finally, the study evaluated the main challenges and limits of the Turkish counter-terrorism policy, including the spread of a continuum of transnational terrorist threats and the global power rivalries.

The Turkish Foreign Policy: A Projection of an Emerging Power in Global Politics

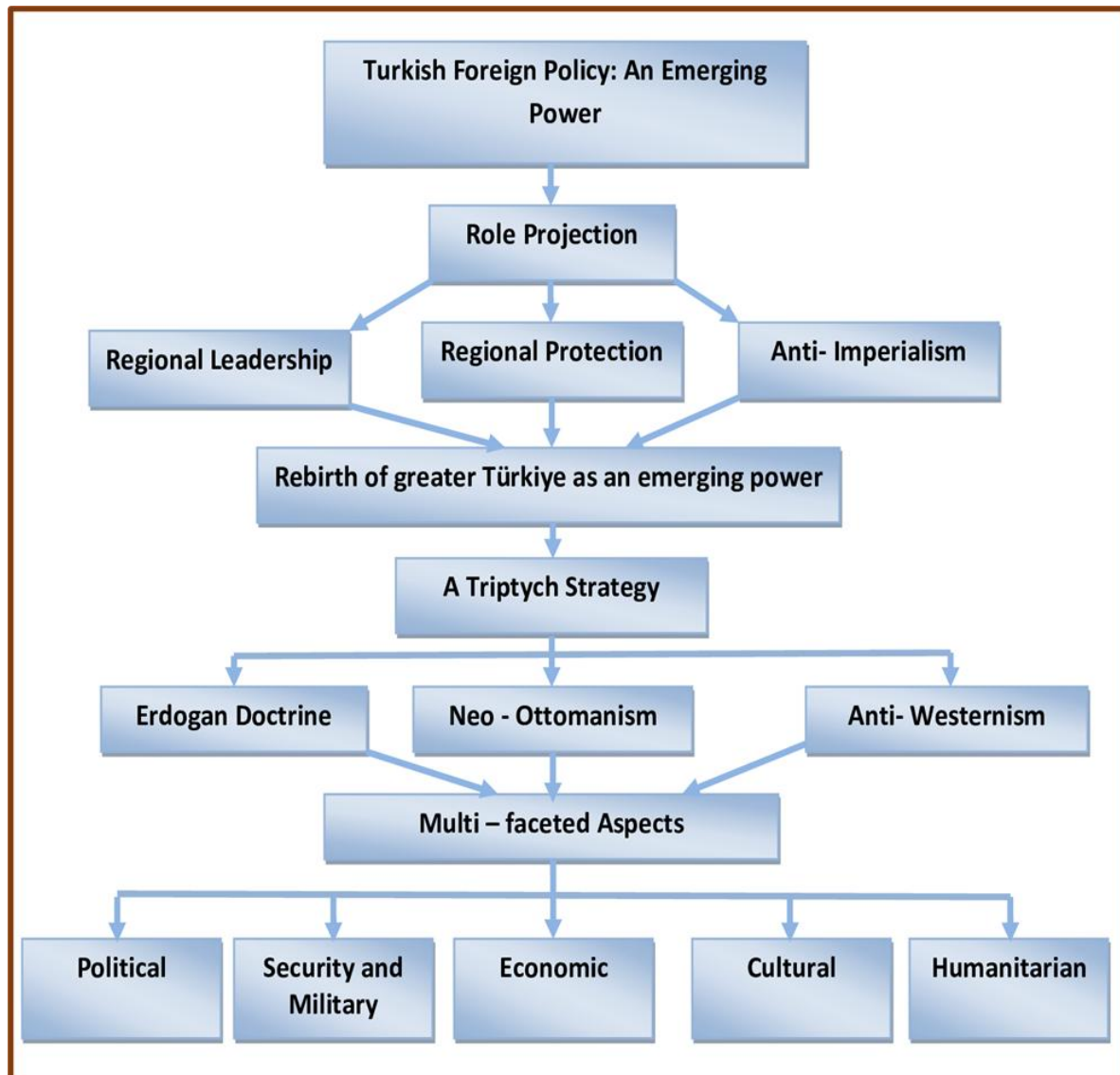
The growing influence of emerging powers in international affairs in shaping the new world order is closely linked to the declining role of existing international organisations and Western diplomatic interventions; these are opening the door to new actors, mostly emerging powers, notably Türkiye, which is leading changes within the international system as a key regional player (Islam, 2024). Türkiye's leaders are aspiring not only to become a 'regional power' but also a global player. Türkiye has therefore sought to consolidate its role as a 'rising power' by leveraging its influence in its immediate geographical neighbourhood and beyond by engaging with other emerging powers on the one hand and with global and regional organisations on the other (Gürzel, 2014). Indeed, conceptions of the national roles (CRN) in Turkish foreign policy are based on the decisions, commitments, rules and actions that the country constantly has to exercise in the international arena and in the regional systems subordinate to it, in particular the role of 'balancing' between the power blocs, that will enable it to preserve its autonomy in an international context characterised by competition between the great powers. Conversely, on the domestic level, there is a consensus between the elites and the structures of decision-making on the national roles, both vertically (between the elites and the masses) and horizontally (between the elites), in the process of implementing a proactive and efficient foreign policy (Cantir, 2012).

Türkiye's growing role as a regional power has been enhanced since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) gained power. Thus, the elite and decision-makers in Turkish foreign policy have formulated and maintained conceptions of self-identification with the coherent roles of the categories of 'regional leader', 'regional protector' and 'collaborator in the world system' (Aras, 2010). However, the architecture of Turkish foreign policy revolving around the projection of an emerging power in world politics is undeniably



carried out under Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. As a result, Türkiye's foreign policy has been marked by neo-Ottoman rhetoric and anti-Western discourse, with an Islamic connotation that uses identity as a vehicle for achieving pragmatic foreign policy objectives and the national interest (Hazır, 2022). This is constructed within the framework of a unique perception of Turkish identity in light of globalisation, taking into account the reality of the Turkish model, which has a democratic experience as a Muslim country (Ari, 2009) in an extremely volatile national and international context, particularly in Africa. (See Diagram 1 drawn up by the author)

Diagram 1



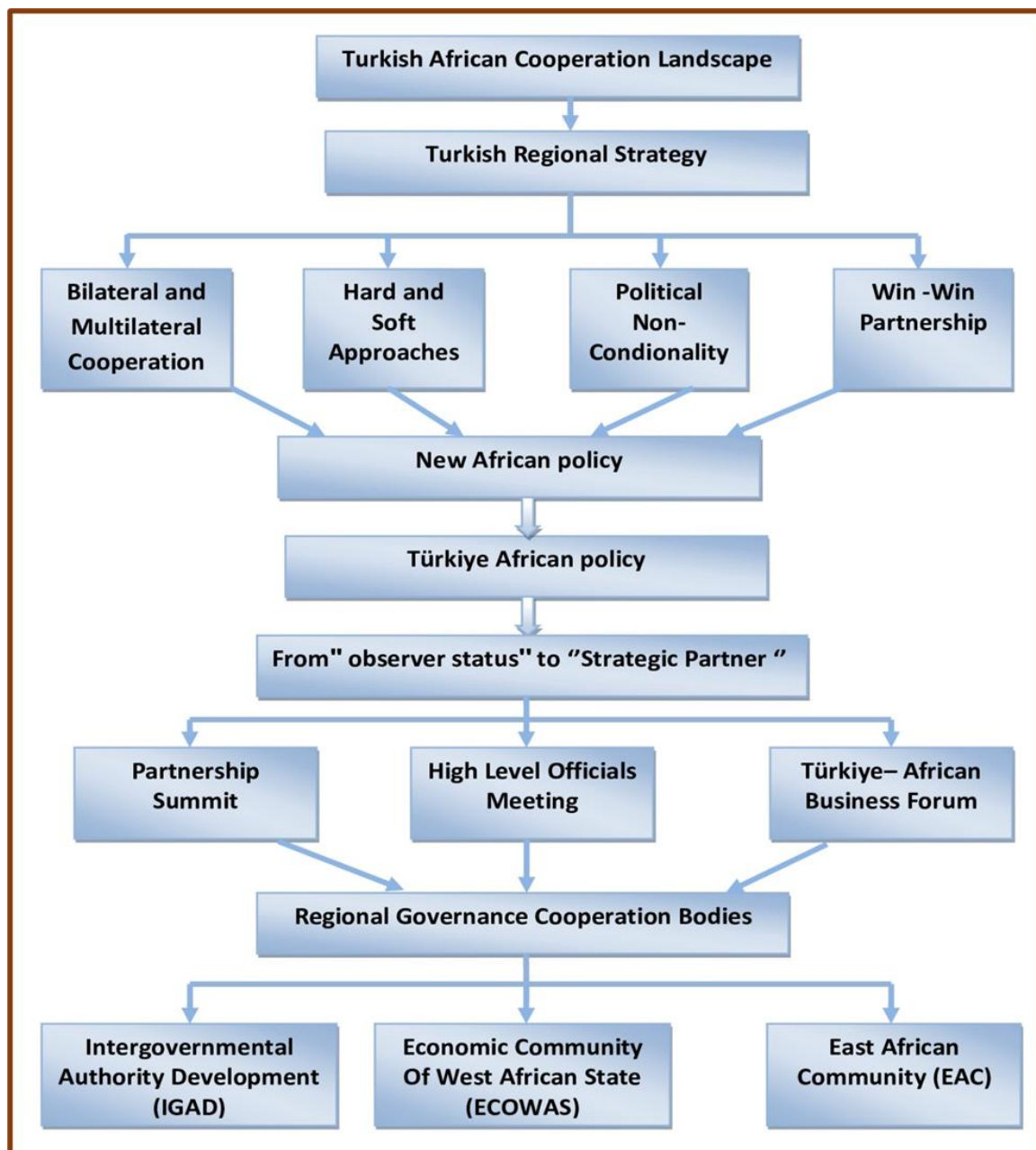
Source: Author



Türkiye's Africa policy: A New Hegemonic Regional Power

The roadmap for the role of Turkish foreign policy in the post-Cold War era has been endowed with a new dynamic vision of 'historical geography' designed to considerably intensify Türkiye's ties with Africa, a continent to which traditional foreign policy had not accorded a sufficiently high profile. In this context, a new repositioning of the foreign policy structure was initiated with the 'Action Plan for Opening to Africa' in 1998, which plays a founding role in Türkiye's African policy, with the characterisation of different perceptions of roles in the African regional system that include 'developer', 'faithful ally', 'defender of the faith', and 'anti-imperialist' (Öztürk, 2023). Türkiye's policy towards Africa is one of the main tools of its foreign policy in the pursuit of its role as a global power. Relations between African countries have been established since the Ottoman Empire and have been strengthened by modern Türkiye, which has established a complex network of political, military and economic linkages with Africa. Turkish-African relations have been pushed to the top of the political agenda under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan; hence, Türkiye has considerably strengthened its ties with the African continent through a two-pronged strategy. Firstly, with a 'diplomatic blitz', the number of Turkish embassies has risen from 12 in 1998 to 44 by 2024, particularly in the Horn of Africa, the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea. Therefore, The concept of an 'Afro-Eurasian' nation has also been materialised, led by a leadership built around a symbolic image of 'Erdogan the African', championing 'Neo-Third Worldism', a notion present in Turkish African rhetoric, and adding to this another considerable asset: African countries with a Muslim majority, where traditions, Islam and progress are compatible (Slaski, 2023).

Relations between Türkiye and Africa have been shaped by a dual strategy: on the one hand, they rely on a multitude of actors, including government bodies, private sector companies, and faith-based groups. This was complemented by soft power: humanitarian aid, education and cultural initiatives, then shifted to the hard power of partnership, while positioning itself not only as a defender of African aspirations but also as a viable alternative to traditional powers such as China and Western countries (Nogueira Pinto, 2024). Thus, the main concern of Turkish foreign policy as a new emerging power with hegemonic aspirations is to discredit its rivals in Africa by taking advantage of the emergence of anti-Western sentiment, proposing other forms of cooperation based on non-interference, territorial integrity and political non-conditionality (Touazi, 2025). Türkiye's strategic ambitions have been shaped by different schools of thought since the end of the Cold War, namely the Islamist strategic vision of the AKP, the secular nationalist, and the Eurasian school of thought, all of which are merged to support the projection of Turkish power, tinged with an ideological dimension linked to the geopolitical rivalry for leadership of the Sunni Muslim world and beyond. In so doing, Türkiye's African policy is shaped by a multifaceted lure for regional hegemony with strong geostrategic ambitions, including the Middle East and then North Africa, before extending to the whole continent. Emphasis has therefore been placed on the instruments of soft and hard power to project Turkish influence (Young, 2020).

**Diagram 2**

Source: Author

In terms of institutional cooperation architecture, Türkiye's relations with the African Union (AU) have undergone a major transformation since the conversion of its role from that of a guest country in 2002 to observer status within the African Union in 2005 and then to a strategic partner in 2008. However, Türkiye coordinates closely with the African Union Commission through meetings and summits of high-level officials with a view to implementing a new model of partnership and intergovernmental cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs (a), 2022), prioritising enhanced collaboration on current issues in the



global arena and on the regional scene, in particular peace, security, governance and justice; this was particularly with the adoption of a joint action plan for the period 2022-2026 (Ergocun, 2021). Meanwhile, within the framework of regional integration organisations, Türkiye's new African policy has been reshaped in line with the geopolitical landscape towards multidimensional cooperation and partnerships, particularly with East Africa, as well as with a policy of institutionalised regionalisation driven by regional bodies such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the East African Community (EAC) (Eshete, 2024), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). Türkiye's new policy towards Africa has surpassed the sole prerogative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to include non-state actors, business organisations and other semi-structured institutions, where sub-regional bodies are playing a pivotal role in the political dynamics in Africa. On one hand, the economic and trade relations are sustained through the Turkish-African Business Association (TABA) and the Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEİK). On the other hand, within the framework of the development and humanitarian activities, the Turkish International Cooperation Agency (TIKA) prioritises a human cooperative approach with the African continent (Ngwa, 2020). (See Diagram 2 drawn up by the author).

Türkiye's counter-terrorism strategy in Africa: A Regional Institutional Governance

Anti-terrorism has become a priority on Türkiye's foreign policy agenda in Africa as part of regionalised institutional governance, reflecting Türkiye's internal security imperatives and the need to increase a multi-dimensional cooperation strategy at the international level to address the threat of transnational terrorism with the rise of local regional affiliates of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Africa in a context of competition between major powers.

Anti-terrorism at the heart of Türkiye's foreign policy priorities in Africa

Traditional counter-terrorism efforts at the regional and international levels have been based primarily on the military and security aspects. In contrast, postmodern policies primarily emphasise cooperative efforts that involve bilateral and multilateral diplomacy among governments to address the nature of terrorism that crosses international borders; consequently, the counter-terrorism preoccupation has become the top agenda of foreign policy (Rogers, 2008). Meanwhile, counter-terrorism has been integrated into the policies of the strategic agenda, including the internal and external dimensions; in this sense, the terrorist threat has transformed the political priorities (Galli, 2008). That's why counter-terrorism practices are based on a configuration that integrates institutional processes under a "security umbrella" (Huysmans, 1998). Terrorism and violent extremism have become the main threats to national, regional and international security. Combating the transnational terrorist threat and building resilience are therefore at the heart of public security and foreign policy. From this perspective, counter-terrorism activities are based on the principles of proportionality and adaptability, as well as on



partnership and cooperation between different actors and sectors, which are essential to address the global threat of terrorism (Canda, 2022). Since 11 September, counter-terrorism strategies have intensified exponentially, with greater emphasis on non-traditional interventions as part of a systematic process of cooperative security (Lum, 2006). Whereas a proactive and multi-institutional strategy focused on 'soft power', with a 'multi-layered and risk-based approach', has been promoted to effectively prevent violent extremism (PVE) (Schmid, 2020), thus anti-terrorism has become a priority in the new Turkish foreign and security policy towards Africa.

In the context of the 'post-September 11 world' and the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), the proliferation of transnational terrorist attacks and their Islamic nexus have become a central preoccupation of international relations. Türkiye has demonstrated a unique foreign policy path halfway between Westernisation and Europeanisation by embracing the role of a secular democracy with an Islamic identity and a majority Muslim population. However, Türkiye's policy of anti-terrorist cooperation is built on the matrix of an antithesis to the symbolic references and stereotypical images of post-September 11 2001 global governance that considers Islam as the negation of secular modernity and liberal democracy and the precondition for success in the global war on terrorism (Keyman, 2009). Therefore, Türkiye has changed its foreign and security policy towards Africa since 2002, particularly through the strengthening of its institutional relations with African regional and sub-regional organisations in the field of anti-terrorism as its main concern. These dynamics are undergone by Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), establishing new Turkish Foreign Policy (TFP) parameters of comprehensive cooperation with various institutions, mechanisms and agencies in Africa to play a more active role in African politics (Siradag, 2013). Nevertheless, Erdogan's Muslim revival was illustrated by the support expressed for the Islamist causes of the Muslim Brotherhood in the post-revolutionary period of the Arab Spring (Kirby, 2023).

Türkiye's counter-terrorism strategy: between domestic considerations and international cooperation

Türkiye's counter-terrorism strategy in Africa reflects a dual pattern of domestic and national experience on the one hand, and its contributions to the international community's efforts to tackle terrorism, particularly jihadist terrorism, on the other. In Turkish foreign policy decision-making circles, there is a consensus based on the fact that the success and effectiveness of efforts to counter the global terrorist threat will be short-sighted and obsolete in the absence of regional and international cooperation. That is why Türkiye has been at the forefront of efforts to counter terrorism by strengthening cooperation between states at both bilateral and multilateral levels. This has been achieved, on the one hand, by insisting on the principle of non-discrimination between terrorist organisations and on the obligation to act with equal determination to prevent and counter all terrorist groups. On the other hand, the rejection of any erroneous association of terrorism linked to religiously motivated jihadist groups such as Al-Qaida and DAESH with any religion or ethnic group. Türkiye is actively involved in the UN's counter-terrorism mechanisms as part of the UN's counter-terrorism strategy and Security Council resolutions. Türkiye also initiated the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum



(GCTF) and is a member of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) through Türkiye's Financial Intelligence Unit (MASAK); moreover, it coordinates actively with the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and co-chairs the Working Group on Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs (b), 2022).

Moreover, Türkiye's counter-terrorism strategy in Africa is also influenced by its strong national experience of effectively confronting various terrorist organisations, notably the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Armenian Secret Liberation Army (ASALA). As part of a paradigm shift in its counter-terrorism strategy, Türkiye has adopted a holistic approach to the fight against terrorism that includes political, cultural, social and economic dimensions, thereby supporting hard security measures and providing sustainable solutions, as well as maintaining a strong focus on international cooperation with institutional instruments. The institutional framework involved in anti-terrorism cooperation consists mainly of the ministries of the interior, justice and foreign affairs, as well as the general staff of the armed forces and the intelligence services as operational structures. In addition, the Department of Internal Security Strategies was established in 2018, supported by the Counter-Terrorism Coordination Council, which oversees the implementation of counter-terrorism activities with the Counter-Terrorism Department, which is part of the General Directorate of the Turkish National Police (Committee on Counter-Terrorism, 2021).

The institutionalised regional engineering of Türkiye's anti-terrorism foreign policy in Africa

According to the steps taken to stop violent extremism, Türkiye has promoted its inclusive interpretation of Islam through various government agencies, most notably the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), which aims to combat hate speech, stop recruitment, and discredit terrorist propaganda (United States Department of State, 2020). In light of this, a comprehensive strategy to counter violent extremism (CVE) has been shaped as part of a de-radicalisation and disengagement process to reintegrate and rehabilitate terrorists and armed militants (San, 2020). Africa has also become a battleground for Erdoğan against the former Hizmet religious movement, described as a terrorist organisation. That's why it urged African countries to adopt a vigorous policy in the fight against this violent extremist faction led by Fethullah Gülen (Fabricius, 2024). However, the "Fetullah Gülen Movement" is particularly engaged in Africa and endowed with a Universalist Islamist vision, influenced by the mystical Islam of the Nakshibendiyya Sufi brotherhood and attached to certain nationalism, with an activism in the world of education, the media and business (Balci, 2015).

Türkiye's counter-terrorism strategy of international cooperation in the fight against jihadists has been implemented as part of a renewed approach that considers transnational religious extremist movements as key actors that challenge national security. That is why a Turkish perception of postmodernist security in the fight against terrorism has emerged, giving primacy to vertical and horizontal institutional cooperation with African regional organisations to promote effective action against the hybridisation of the globalised jihadist threat (Yilmaz, 2011). Besides, Türkiye collaborates closely with



the institutional architectures of the African Union in charge of the fight against terrorism. Indeed, collective cooperation is occurring principally through the Commission of the African Union within the framework of the Department of Peace and Security (DPS). More importantly, counter-terrorism coordination is supported by the African Union Peace and Security Council (PSC) with accelerated operationalisation of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), and collective efforts to address the terrorist threat have incorporated proactive governance in hybrid risks with the sub-committee on counter-terrorism linked to the Defence and Security Division (DDS). However, the institutional arrangements for Turkish-African cooperation recognise the transnational nature of the terrorist threat. To this end, a series of mechanisms have been deployed through a trans-regional partnership with the member states of the regional economic communities while maintaining a high level of cooperation with the Committee of Intelligence and Security Services in Africa (CISSA) and the African Police Cooperation Mechanism (AFRIPOL) (Nkalow Ngoula, 2016).

Türkiye's African counter-terrorism strategy: a double game between hard and soft approaches

The fight against terrorism in Africa requires a solid security and military infrastructure, as well as the use of sophisticated materials and equipment with advanced technologies to support counter-terrorism operations. Here again, unlike American or European countries which often impose conditions on counter-terrorism cooperation, Türkiye stands out for its approach of unconditional support for counter-terrorism operations, with the supply of military equipment including Turkish drones and unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) in particular the Bayraktar TB2 fighter plane, as well as the Anka, Karayel and Aksungur aircraft. The military attachés and officers responsible for promoting cooperation in the fight against terrorism often accompany the coordination and exchange of information between the various intelligence and security services with agreements on security cooperation and defence against terrorist organisations (Vial, 2025). However, Turkish military and defence diplomacy has established long-term institutional ties of strategic cooperation with African countries in a context of growing instability linked to jihadism on the continent, thereby strengthening its existing instruments through a mutually reinforcing policy of counter-terrorism partnership (Tanrıverdi Yaşar, 2022).

The use of armed drones by jihadist groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has pushed African countries in their counter-terrorism operations to turn to Türkiye, which has become the world's leading exporter of drones to Africa. Thus, in 2024, Türkiye's arms exports had reached a record level of \$7.1 billion in more than 18 African countries, representing an increase of 103%. The Bayraktar TB2 and Akıncı combat drones are the central instruments in the fight against terrorism in Ethiopia, Togo, Niger, and Libya. Moreover, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have also deployed these drones (Bhattacharya, 2025) to combat jihadist groups in the Sahel. Türkiye also supplied Algeria with its Aksungur and Anka drones to Tunisia; the STM defence company supplied Togan drones to Nigeria (Dedet, 2023). Additionally, Türkiye's hard strategies for addressing terrorism in Africa



involve the engagement of Turkish military troops in UN peacekeeping missions in Mali and Central Africa, a commitment that began in 2016, even though Türkiye and Somalia had already created a joint task force command in 2017 (Heibach, 2024, p.315). Consequently, TURKSOM stands out as Türkiye's most extensive overseas military training facility, operating five training sites in Libya since 2020 and also supplying African countries with security equipment to tackle the increasing threat of jihadist rebellions (Aksoy, 2022).

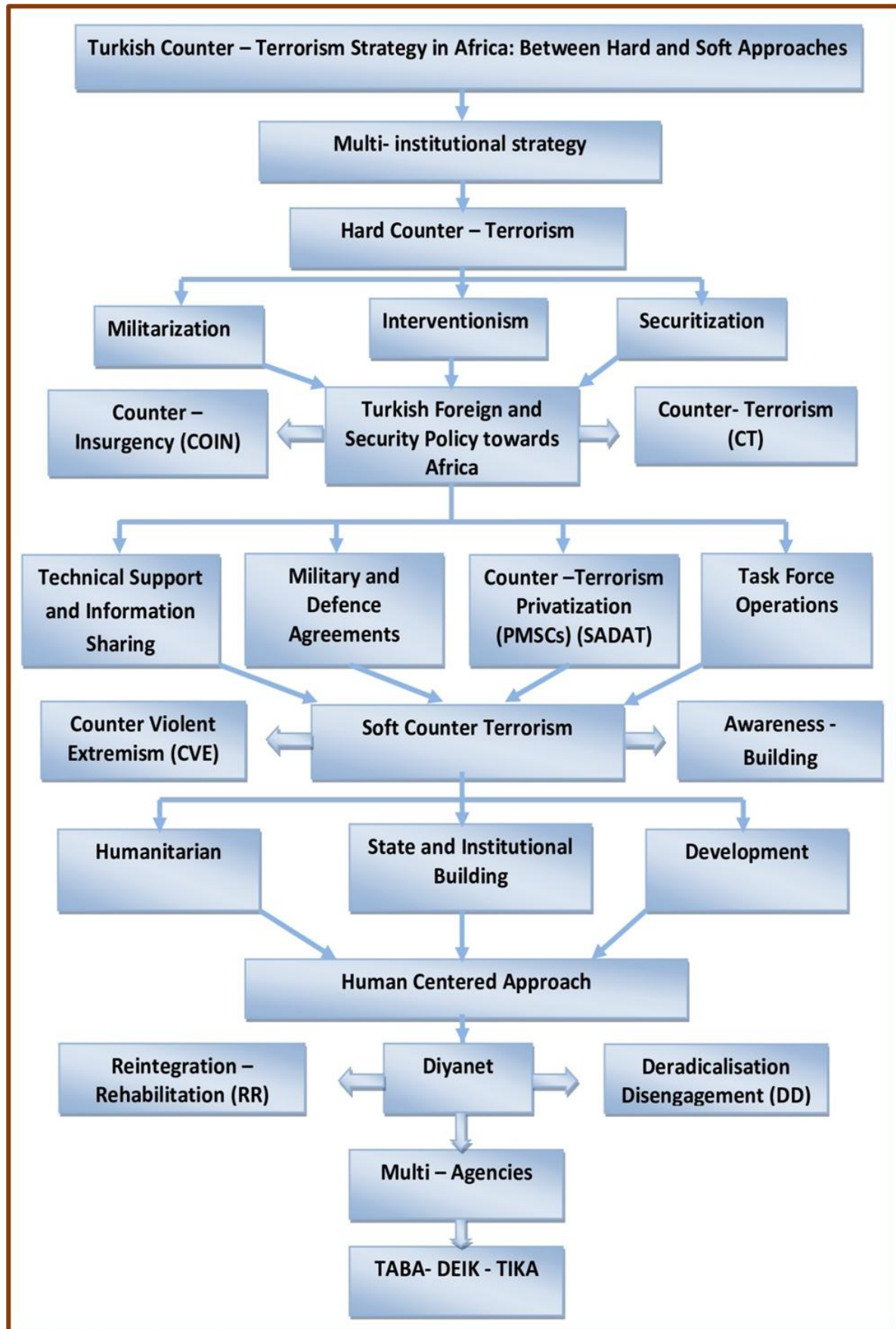
Türkiye's counter-terrorism policy in Africa is characterised by a mix of soft and hard measures as part of its long-term multidimensional foreign policy aimed at strengthening its status as an 'indispensable partner' for African countries and expanding its sphere of influence in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), particularly linked to the perception of Turkish decision-makers as a 'great power'. In this context, the African continent has been the scene of terrorist attacks, from the Horn of Africa to the Sahel and West Africa, with the intensification of Al-Shabaab attacks and the growing threat from local branches of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (Dal, 2023). That is why, at the 2024 Türkiye-Africa summit on defence and security, African countries called for Türkiye to step up its efforts in the fight against terrorism, contributing to the goals of peace, security and development in Africa in line with the continent's Vision 2063 objectives. Indeed, the fight against extremist organisations such as Boko Haram and ISIS requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account local realities and the diverse cultural dynamics of African actors, especially Sufism, which reveals the inclusivity of Islamic identities in the region but also, serves as a bulwark against violent extremism (TASAM, 2025).

However, Türkiye's proactive counter-terrorism policy, with its commitment to providing material resources and capacity building to African countries as a legitimate mediator on the continent, can be partly explained by its Muslim heritage. Indeed, Erdoğan has used Islam as a political weapon, emphasising religious affiliation in international relations. Türkiye has thus built closer ties with Africa by using political soft power tools in the fight against terrorism. As a result, Ankara has supported the creation of religious schools and mosques in Muslim African countries; in addition, it has exploited its Ottoman Islamic past as an ideological leverage to increase its geopolitical influence in Africa. At the same time, Türkiye has embarked on a hard-line counter-terrorism strategy through multilateral military cooperation as an active member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), offering African states considerable technical assistance, particularly in the areas of capacity building and training in the fight against piracy and terrorism (Kharief, 2022). In the meantime, the Turkish privatisation of counter-terrorism in Africa is implemented through the Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs), namely with the increased activities of the International Defence Consultancy Company (SADAT), aligned with the Turkish foreign policy objectives and has deeply impacted African political conflict dynamics. The SADAT is operating as a hybrid structure of 'mercenaries', similar to the Russian private military company system, i.e., a 'Turkish Wagner'. But it is characterised by the use of religious and cultural denominators to promote cooperation in the defence industry between Islamic countries and as a key player in counter-terrorism policies (St-Pierre, 2024). From an African perspective, Turkey's approach to addressing the terrorist threat is multidimensional, with a particular focus on interventionism and militarisation within the framework of measures ranging



from counter-insurgency (COIN) and counter-terrorism (CT) to strengthening anti-terrorist capabilities. Since then, Türkiye has contributed to multilateral efforts for peace, security and international stability in Africa, particularly in Mali, the Central African Republic (CAR), Congo, Libya, Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia. Nevertheless, unlike other international actors involved in the fight against terrorism in Africa, such as the United States, France, the European Union, China and Russia, Türkiye, as an emerging power, is primarily seeking to reposition itself geostrategically among the major powers (Ehrhart, 2019).

Turkish efforts in Africa in terms of soft power as an instrument for preventing radicalisation and violent extremism have materialised through the institutionalisation of cooperation through various governmental bodies, including the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), the Turkish Maarif Foundation, and the Presidency of Religious Affairs (DIYANET), as well as non-governmental organisations, which have been heavily involved in development and humanitarian aid projects (Çelik, 2024). Indeed, Diyanet embodies Turkey's confessional diplomacy in Africa with a very powerful network in Mauritania, Ethiopia, Somalia, Tanzania, Kenya, Niger, Uganda, Sudan, Cameroon, Madagascar, Ghana, South Africa, and Chad. The services provided focus on religious education, mosque construction, and scholarship programmes for African students to take Quran courses or study at theological faculties in Turkey. Moreover, religious and Islamic NGOs play a pivotal role in faith-based diplomacy in preventing violent extremism, such as the Yunus Emre Institute (YEE) and the Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Foundation (Oprea, 2024, p.176-177). In this context, in 2020, the Maarif Foundation had established 144 schools in 24 African countries with scholarships for students from countries with large Muslim populations, such as Egypt, Somalia, Morocco, Libya, Sudan, and Nigeria (Tepeciklioğlu, 2020). Meanwhile, TIKA is considered a soft power mechanism of Turkish anti-terrorist strategy in Africa, operating over 22 offices across the continent and implementing various aid initiatives (Dedet, 2021), especially in the Horn of Africa and Somalia, where it has managed about 160 projects focused on education, infrastructure, and local development since 2011, efforts that have significantly aided in reclaiming areas previously controlled by the Islamist group Al-Shabaab (Sofos, 2022, p.21). (See Diagram 3 drawn up by the author)

**Diagram 3**



Challenges and Limits of the Turkish Counter-Terrorism Policy in Africa: Between Global Power Rivalries and Terrorist Threat Nebulas

Türkiye is making considerable efforts to fill the security vacuum left by Western disengagement in Africa, while its anti-terrorism policies complement those of Russia. Given that France and Türkiye are rivals for influence in Africa, Türkiye has been highly critical of France's neo-colonial anti-terrorist military intervention in the Sahel. Türkiye is leveraging its Muslim roots and shared cultural values with the predominantly Muslim countries of the Sahel as an advantage over competition from Western powers, thereby establishing itself as a leading alternative to Western and Russian security partnerships in the fight against terrorism in Africa (Tyson, 2025). China, Russia, Türkiye, and some Gulf states have been involved in Africa as part of the great powers' race for influence, which presents both advantages and disadvantages, particularly in terms of regional counter-terrorism governance. Although this presence has increased operations against jihadist groups, it has had a relatively limited impact because of the conflicting political agendas of the national interests of these powers (Wilén, 2025). However, Türkiye must avoid falling into the trap of repeating the failed Western anti-terrorism governance strategies that are overly focused on a dual game of security obsessions and militarisation. In this regard, Türkiye must be imperatively grounded in the local realities of African countries but also advocate a fight against terrorism with strong commitment from the various actors and the support of the international community and international and regional organisations. At the same time, Turkish anti-terrorism operations must incorporate a holistic and inclusive approach in order to eliminate the breeding ground for terrorism while promoting the priority of anti-terrorism resolved by African solutions and thus play the role of 'active auxiliaries' in the face of competition between major powers (Zhu, 2024).

Furthermore, the major obstacle to Türkiye's counter-terrorism policy in Africa is the constant rise of nebulous jihadist threats, with a significant number of terrorist entities across the African continent hampering counter-terrorism cooperation operations. The main active terrorist groups include regional affiliates of Al-Qaeda, namely Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM). Meanwhile, in the broader landscape, there are local branches of the Islamic State in Africa, such as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and the Islamic State in Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda (ISSKTU) (Warner, 2018). Indeed, jihadist movements maintain complex links with international terrorist networks, exploiting state failure and ungoverned spaces across the African continent, thus providing fertile ground for the rise of radicalisation and violent extremism in a typical African context of poor governance, economic deprivation and social marginalisation. This poses a considerable challenge to operational capabilities and multifaceted regional and international counter-terrorism efforts (Rufus, 2024). While, the 'coup belt' that shook the West African region from 2020 to 2024, on one hand, has a direct impact on the trajectories of jihadism and anti-terrorism policies, on the others this has led to the emergence of new international actors, namely Russia and Türkiye, who are occupying a central place in the regional chessboard to counter the jihadist threat. However, it remains to be seen whether their efforts in the fight against



terrorism will be effective in the long term or whether they will suffer the same fate as Western anti-terrorism strategies, which are doomed to failure (Thurston, 2024).

Concluding Analysis

Türkiye's counter-terrorism strategy in Africa is undoubtedly part of the flaunting game-changing of its foreign policy conceptions of the national roles (CRN) as an emerging power with global aspirations shaped under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and deeply orientated with the political agendas of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). However, Turkish Foreign Policy (TFP) reflects an increasing role projection of power, claiming regional leadership, but this dynamic is undergone on one hand within an enhanced regional cooperative approach with global and regional organizations. On the other hand, the TFP roadmap in the post-Cold War era and in the current volatile geopolitical landscape is construed under a triptych strategy, including anti-imperialism, anti-Westernism, and the neo-Ottoman 'Erdoğan doctrine, which paves the way to the rebirth of the great Türkiye.

Türkiye's Africa policy is categorized under the characteristics of the new hegemonic regional power in a context of global power competitions with a rapidly changing African environment; thus, counter-terrorism diplomacy at bilateral and multilateral levels has become a high-level item on the Turkish foreign policy agenda and an instrument of its security policy toward the African continent. Indeed, TFP is spearheaded through an institutionalized regionalization within the African Union (AU) and the regional organizations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the East African Community (EAC), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Meanwhile, Türkiye's new policy towards Africa is sustained through the non-state actors, business agencies and other semi-structured institutions, namely the pivotal role of the Turkish International Cooperation Agency (TIKA) in the African development, political and humanitarian dynamics.

Türkiye's counter-terrorism strategy in Africa is elaborated through regional institutional governance, with an intensified interest since 11 September, which has reshaped the order of priorities from traditional security focus to postmodern counter-terrorism policies. In this regard, Türkiye has been in the spotlight due to attempts to associate Islam with terrorism, adopting a distinct foreign policy with a unique model that reconciles Islamic identity and secular democracy. In Africa, Türkiye's counterterrorism strategy reflects both its contributions to the international community's efforts to combat terrorism, especially jihadist terrorism, and its own domestic and national experiences. The institutionalised regional engineering of Türkiye's anti-terrorism foreign policy in Africa is constructed under a comprehensive strategy including humanitarian, religious diplomacy and preventing violent extremism (CVE) led by the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), forming a double game between hard and soft approaches. However, Türkiye's privatization of counter-terrorism operations in Africa is driven by the private military and security companies (PMSCs), particularly with the intensification of the International Defence Consultancy Company (SADAT) activities.



Nevertheless, Turkish counter-terrorism policy in Africa has numerous challenges and limits. Namely, the constant emergence of jihadist threats with regional affiliates of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State has turned the continent into a sanctuary for global jihadism, hence undermining regional and international policies in the fight against terrorism. Simultaneously, competition between global powers with contending political agendas and national interests are not serving sustainable anti-terrorism cooperation of the African countries. That is why Türkiye's counter-terrorism strategies must avoid the western failures by supporting Africans' efforts rooted in local realities to find integrated solutions to their complex problems that are the root causes of terrorism, radicalization and violent extremism.

References

- ADF. (2024, mai 14). Turkey pushes to expand influence in africa. *Africa Defense Forum*. <https://adf-magazine.com/2024/05/turkey-pushes-to-expand-influence-in-africa/>
- Ajayi, V. O. (2025). A review on primary sources of data and secondary sources of data. *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 1. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5378785>
- Aksoy, H. A., Çevik, S., & Yaşar, N. T. (2022, juin 3). *Visualising turkey's activism in africa*. Centre for Applied Turkey Studies. <https://www.cats-network.eu/visualisations/visualising-turkeys-activism-in-africa>
- Aras, B., & Gorener, A. (2010). National role conceptions and foreign policy orientation : The ideational bases of the Justice and Development Party's foreign policy activism in the Middle East. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 12(1), 73-92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448950903507453>
- Arı, T. (2009). *Role of Identity and identification of Role in Turkey's Foreign Policy*. *Annual Conference of International Studies Association*. 1-15. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333661981_Role_of_Identity_and_identification_of_Role_in_Turkey's_Foreign_Policy
- Balci, B. (2015). Le hizmet de Fethullah Gülen : Quelle place dans l'islam en France et en Europe? *Études*, juin (6), 19-31. <https://doi.org/10.3917/etu.4217.0019>
- Belleville, P., Galibert, A., & Duru, M. (2019, avril 2). *Systemic approach*. dico AE Dictionary of Agroecology. <https://dicoagroecologie.fr/en/dictionnaire/systemic-approach/>
- Bhattacharya, S. (2025, août 18). *Drone Statecraft: Turkey's Expanding Security Footprint in Africa*. Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/drone-statecraft-turkey-s-expanding-security-footprint-in-africa>
- Canada, S. publique. (2018, décembre 21). *Renforcer la résilience face au terrorisme : Stratégie antiterroriste du Canada*. <https://www.securitepublique.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/rsInc-gnst-trrrsm/index-fr.aspx>
- Cantir, C., & Kaarbo, J. (2012). Contested roles and domestic politics: Reflections on role theory in foreign policy analysis and ir theory1: contested roles and domestic politics. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 8(1), 5-24.



Çelik, M. (2024, août 2). *New phase of türkiye-africa ties: From development aid to strategic security cooperation - mehmet çelik – global panorama*. Panorama, Online . <https://www.globalpanorama.org/en/2024/08/new-phase-of-turkiye-africa-ties-from-development-aid-to-strategic-security-cooperation-mehmet-celik/>

Committee on Counter-Terrorism. (2021). *Profiles on Counter-Terrorism Capacity Turkey*. Council of Europe, 1-9. <https://rm.coe.int/profile-turkey-2021/1680a477d0>

Dal, E., & Dipama, S. (2023). *Assessing turkey-africa engagements*. APRI - Africa Policy Research Private Institute gUG (haftungsbeschränkt). <https://doi.org/10.59184/pb023.03>

Dedet, J. (2023, octobre 17). *Turkey's arms industry takes off in Africa*. The Africa Report. <https://www.theafricareport.com/325048/turkeys-arms-industry-takes-off-in-africa/>

Dedet, J. (2021, décembre). *Turquie : « Un tiers de notre aide au développement est consacré à l'Afrique »*. Jeune Afrique. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1263044/economie-entreprises/turquie-afun-tiers-de-notre-aide-au-developpement-est-consacre-a-afriqueaf/>

Ehrhart, H.-G. (2019). *Military Engagement of the US, France, and Germany in the Sahel. Towards liberal peace by post-modern intervention?* In H.-G. Ehrhart (Éd.), *Sicherheits- und Friedensordnungen in Afrika*. Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft. mbH & Co. KG, 71-90.

Ergocun, G., Sadik Kadir, A., & Sahin, T. (2021, décembre 18). *Turkey-Africa Partnership Summit adopts joint declaration*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/turkey-africa-partnership-summit-adopts-joint-declaration/2451160>

Eshete, I. M. (2024). Türkiye multilateral relationship: The case of east africa, igad, and eac. *Insight Turkey*, 26(3), 13.

Fabricius, P. (2024, novembre 1). *Décrypter la politique africaine de la Turquie*. ISS Africa. <https://issafrica.org/fr/iss-today/decrypter-la-politique-africaine-de-la-turquie>

Fabricius, P. (2024, novembre 1). *Décrypter la politique africaine de la Turquie*. ISS Africa. <https://issafrica.org/fr/iss-today/decrypter-la-politique-africaine-de-la-turquie>

Galli, F. (2008). The Legal and Political Implications of the Securitisation of Counter-Terrorism Measures across the Mediterranean. *Euromesco Paper*, 71, 1-33.

Gürzel, A. (2014). Turkey's role as a regional and global player and its power capacity: Turkey's engagement with other emerging states. *Revista de Sociologia e Política*, 22(50), 95-105.

Haşimi, C. (2014). Turkey's humanitarian diplomacy and development cooperation. *Insight Turkey*, 16(1), 135-136.

Hazır, U. N. (2022). Anti-westernism in turkey's neo-ottomanist foreign policy under erdoğan. *Russia in Global Affairs*, 20(2), 164-183. <https://doi.org/10.31278/1810-6374-2022-20-2-164-183>

Heibach, J., & Taş, H. (2024). Beyond the soft-hard power binary: Resource control in turkey's foreign policy towards sub-saharan africa. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern*



Studies, 26(3), 315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2023.2236510>

Huysmans, J. (1998). Dire et écrire la sécurité: Le dilemme normatif des études de sécurité. *Cultures & conflits*, 31-32. <https://doi.org/10.4000/conflits.545>

Islam, Md. N., & Nyadera, I. N. (2024). Emerging middle powers, transitions, and the role of turkey in a changing international order. *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis*, 79(4), 489-509.

Kamal, G. (2025, mai 5). *Turkey's african ascent: Strategy, ambitions, and challenges*. African Narratives. <https://africannarratives.org/turkeys-african-ascent-strategy-ambitions-and-challenges>

Keyman, E. F., & Senem, A. (2009). Turkish foreign policy in a globalizing world. *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 8(1), 35-36.

Kharief, A. (2022, juin). Diplomats, spies and arms dealers: Turkey's great game in north africa - rosa luxemburg stiftung. *RLS North Africa*. <https://rosaluxna.org/publications/diplomats-spies-and-arms-dealers-turkeys-great-game-in-north-africa/>

Kirby, P. (2023, mars 24). Erdogan: Turkey's all-powerful leader of 20 years. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-13746679>

Kurniawati, D. E. (2017). Intermestic approach: A methodological alternative in studying policy change. *PCD Journal*, 5(1), 147. <https://doi.org/10.22146/pcd.26293>

Lum, C., Kennedy, L. W., & Sherley, A. (2006). Are counter-terrorism strategies effective? The results of the Campbell systematic review on counter-terrorism evaluation research. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 2(4), 489-516. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-006-9020-y>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2022a). *TÜRKİYE-AFRICA RELATIONS*. Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-africa-relations.en.mfa>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2022b). *Türkiye's Contributions to International Community's Efforts to Fight Terrorism*. Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-s-contributions-to-international-community-s-efforts-to-fight-terrorism.en.mfa>

Ngwa, N. R. (2019). Turkish-African Relations: An Institutional Approach of Turkish Foreign Policy Towards Africa. *Journal of International Relations and Diplomacy*, 2(2), 23-43.

Nkalwo Ngoula, J. L. (2016). L'Union africaine à l'épreuve du terrorisme: Forces et challenges de la politique africaine de sécurité. *Thinking Africa*, 11(35), 1-25. https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=http://www.thinkingafrica.org/V2/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/NAP_35.pdf

Nogueira Pinto, T. (2024, avril 9). Turkey is gaining ground in Africa. *Intelligence Services AG*. <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/turkey-influence-africa/>

Oğuzlu, T. (2007). Soft power in Turkish foreign policy. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 61(1), 92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357710601142518>



Oprea, I.-A. (2024). Turkey's faith-based diplomacy in Africa: Muslim Leadership and the Useful Western "Other. *Afriche e Orienti*, 27(2), 172-191. <https://doi.org/10.23810/AEOXXVII202428>

Öztürk, M., & Duman, M. (2023). A founding role in türkiye's africa policy: The action plan for opening to africa. *Insight Turkey*, 25(3), 223-228.

Rogers, P. (2008). Terrorism. In P. Williams (Éd.), *Security studies: An introduction* (Routledge 1st edition, p. 171-184).

Rufus, A. I. (2024). Ungoverned Spaces and the Challenges of Terrorism in Africa. *Kashere Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 2(2), 490-503.

San, S. (2020). Counter-terrorism policing innovations in Turkey: A case study of Turkish National Police CVE experiment. *Policing and Society*, 30(5), 583-598. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2018.1561697>

Schmid, A. P. (2020). *Handbook of terrorism prevention and preparedness* (A. P. Schmid, Éd.). International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 15-21.

Siradag, A. (2013). The making of the new Turkish foreign and security policy towards Africa-the rationale, roots and dynamics. *Africa Insight*, 43(1), 15.

Slaski, B. (2023, octobre 31). *La politique africaine de la Turquie*. Telos. <https://www.telos-eu.com/fr/politique-francaise-et-internationale/la-politique-africaine-de-la-turquie.html>

Sofos, S. (2022). Peacebuilding in turbulent times: Turkey in MENA and Africa. *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series*, 61, 21. https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/114559/3/Peacebuilding_in_Turbulent_Times_1.pdf

St-Pierre, Y. (2024). Les sociétés militaires privées comme acteur de politique : Comment le « système Wagner » affecte les stratégies de politique étrangère. *Revue Défense Nationale*, 873(8), 31-36. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rdna.873.0031>

Tanrıverdi Yaşar, N. (2022). Unpacking Turkey's security footprint in Africa: Trends and implications for the EU. *SWP Comment*, 42/2022. <https://doi.org/10.18449/2022C42>

TASAM. (2025, janvier 3). *7th Türkiye-Africa Defense, Security I Declaration*. Turkish Asian Center for Strategic Studies. https://tasam.org/en/Icerik/73732/7th_turkiye-africa_defense_security_i_declaration?fbclid=IwY2xjawKi9spleHRuA2F1bQIxMABicmlkET_E2TGhWMGd5UWtnb09XZIJPAR5rrhtTKlozFnaNakZvGRzpomOzl6ev-fnMCLvy7t_e7qutIfq_2wFwNMRMSQ_aem_3iJFazD0_Du-erUnujeG3Q

Tepeciklioğlu, E. E. (2020). Turkey's African engagement: A critical analysis. In Emi Vergels (Ed.), *Eurasia goes to Africa* (European Policy Centre, p. 52).

Thurston, A. (2024). Military coups, jihadism and insecurity in the Central Sahel. *West African Papers*, 43, 1-30. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/05/military-coups-jihadism-and-insecurity-in-the-central-sahel_4f7f928f/522f69f1-en.pdf



Touazi, I., Sau, A., & Benucci, M. (2025, janvier 14). Türkiye, the new regional hegemonic power in Africa. *ITSS Verona*. <https://www.itssverona.it/turkiye-the-new-regional-hegemonic-power-in-africa>

Toulemonde, M. (2023, juin 8). *How Erdogan turned Turkey into a key player in Africa via economy, religion, arms...*. The Africa Report. <https://www.theafricareport.com/311569/how-erdogan-turned-turkey-into-a-key-player-in-africa-via-economy-religion-arms/>

Tyson, K., Karr, L., & Ford, Y. (2025, février 13). *Saf announces government plan and russian naval base; drc concedes to direct talks with m23; turkey's growing defense partnerships in africa*. Critical Threats. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/africa-file-february-13-2025-saf-announces-government-plan-and-russian-naval-base-drc-concedes-to-direct-talks-with-m23-turkeys-growing-defense-partnerships-in-africa>

United States Department of State. (2020). Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Turkey. *United States Department of State*. <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/turkey/>

Vial, A.-S., & Bouvier, E. (2025, mars 6). *Türkiye, the new regional power in Africa (3/3). A military presence that is now greater than that of the former European powers*. Les clés du Moyen-Orient. <https://www.lesclesdumoyenorient.com/Turkiye-the-new-regional-power-in-Africa-3-3-A-military-presence-that-is-now.html>

Warner, J., & Hulme, C. (2018). The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating fighter numbers in cells across the continent. *CTC Sentinel*, 11(7), 21-28.

Wilén, N. (2025). Stepping up Engagement in the Sahel: Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf States. *Egmont Policy Brief*, 375, 1-8. https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2025/04/Nina-Wilen_Policy_Brief_375_vFinal.pdf?type=pdf

Yilmaz, S. (2011). Question of Strategy in Counter-Terrorism: " Turkish Case". *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 2(1), 140-151.

Young, M. (2020, juillet 27). *The lure of regional hegemony*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2020/07/the-lure-of-regional-hegemony?lang=en>

Zhu, Y., & Gao, W. (2024). The Sahel on the edge of the abyss? Why U.S. counterterrorism engagement has failed to achieve its goal? *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6, 1466715. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2024.1466715>

SOFT ANARCHY: BALANCING SOVEREIGNTY, REGIONALISM, AND GLOBALIZATION

MEHMET RECAI UYGUR

mehmetrecai.uygur@smk.lt

Senior Researcher, SMK College of Applied Sciences, Vilnius (Lithuania). Orcid: 0000-0003-1872-0885

YUSUF ZAKIR BASKIN

yusuf.zakir.baskin@gmail.com

Lecturer, Gendarmerie and Coast Guard Academy, Ankara, (Türkiye). Orcid: 0000-0002-4085-4022

FATİH TEKİN

fatihtekin@inonu.edu.tr

Research Assistant, Inonu University, Malatya (Türkiye). Orcid:0000-0003-2227-0784

Abstract

In the international relations discipline, arguably the most consequential divide in the system is between anarchy and hierarchy. Although the international system is formally anarchic, beneath its surface lies a persistent hierarchy. As Hedley Bull suggests, anarchy does not produce chaos but an international society governed by norms, albeit one that often masks the dominance of great powers. Thucydides' Melian Dialogue captures this imbalance most starkly. The example closest to our time is the United Nations Security Council, which epitomises how, with the rhetoric of sovereignty, structural inequity is hidden. In contrast, soft anarchy provides the opposite explanation: a system that permits cooperation without the need to nullify the anarchic nature of global politics. Kenneth Waltz's structural realism argues that states, in isolation, act to survive in a self-help ecosystem. Soft anarchy alters this assumption; it emphasises that within regional platforms, power is allowed to be pooled. Rather than being subordinated to a global hierarchy, states are able to act through regional organisations. In this scenario, states are able to preserve sovereignty while enhanced cooperation is achieved by many. The claim made by Alexander Wendt, 'anarchy is what states make of it', supports this model, claiming that if the structure is socially constructed, then it can be softened with regional agency. Thus, soft anarchy embodies Rousseau's notion of collective will and Bull's 'anarchical society' rephrased to the regional level. Here, power shifts from a zero-sum tool to a shared instrument of governance. The soft anarchy is not a utopia; instead, utopia is to manage global volatility. It provides a concept where the world is not still divided into 193 actors; rather, it is grouped into cooperative blocs with the capability of restoring order. It is a form of invitation to perceive order in anarchy and cooperation within sovereignty.

Keywords

Soft Anarchy, Regional Organisations, International Order, Anarchy and Hierarchy, Power and Cooperation.



Resumo

Na disciplina das relações internacionais, pode argumentar-se que a divisão mais consequente no sistema é entre anarquia e hierarquia. Embora o sistema internacional seja formalmente anárquico, por baixo da sua superfície existe uma hierarquia persistente. Como sugere Hedley Bull, a anarquia não produz caos, mas sim uma sociedade internacional governada por normas, embora muitas vezes mascare o domínio das grandes potências. O Diálogo Meliano de Tucídides capta este desequilíbrio de forma muito clara. O exemplo mais próximo do nosso tempo é o Conselho de Segurança das Nações Unidas, que simboliza como, com a retórica da soberania, a desigualdade estrutural é ocultada. Em contrapartida, a anarquia soft oferece a explicação oposta: um sistema que permite a cooperação sem a necessidade de anular a natureza anárquica da política global. O realismo estrutural de Kenneth Waltz argumenta que os Estados, isoladamente, agem para sobreviver num ecossistema de autoajuda. A anarquia soft altera essa suposição; ela enfatiza que, dentro das plataformas regionais, o poder pode ser compartilhado. Em vez de se submeterem a uma hierarquia global, os Estados podem agir por meio de organizações regionais. Nesse cenário, os Estados conseguem preservar a soberania, enquanto muitos alcançam uma cooperação aprimorada. A afirmação de Alexander Wendt, «a anarquia é o que os Estados fazem dela», apoia este modelo, alegando que, se a estrutura é construída socialmente, então pode ser suavizada com a agência regional. Assim, a anarquia suave incorpora a noção de Rousseau de vontade coletiva e a «sociedade anárquica» de Bull reformulada para o nível regional. Aqui, o poder passa de uma ferramenta de soma zero para um instrumento partilhado de governação. A anarquia suave não é uma utopia; em vez disso, a utopia é gerir a volatilidade global. Ela fornece um conceito em que o mundo não está mais dividido em 193 atores, mas sim agrupado em blocos cooperativos com a capacidade de restaurar a ordem. É uma forma de convite para perceber a ordem na anarquia e a cooperação dentro da soberania.

Palavras-chave

Anarquia soft, Organizações Regionais, Ordem Internacional, Anarquia e Hierarquia, Poder e Cooperação.

How to cite this article

Uygur, Mehmet Recai, Baskin, Yusuf Zakir & Tekin, Fatih (2025). Soft Anarchy: Balancing Sovereignty, Regionalism, and Globalization. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 149-168. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.8>

Article submitted on 24th May 2025 and accepted for publication on 11st August 2025.





SOFT ANARCHY: BALANCING SOVEREIGNTY, REGIONALISM, AND GLOBALIZATION

MEHMET RECAI UYGUR

YUSUF ZAKIR BASKIN

FATIH TEKIN

Introduction

The international system has oriented itself as anarchic, or the absence of any central authority to control relations among sovereign entities. This situation has been depicted, for example, with close to 193 states, each of which operates in a self-help system characterised by low trust and high conflict (Waltz, 1979). While symbolically grounded in a UN figure, this snapshot betrays the more disorderly nature of world politics. The contemporary international order is not merely a homogeneous plain filled with equal sovereigns, but rather a diverse constellation of actors which includes: states, regional entities, international organisations, multinational companies, non-profit organisations, and even transnational epistemic networks (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Keohane & Nye, 1977). Apart from being anarchical, it is also messy, splintered, and lacking consistent norms.

In this multifaceted domain, the traditional understanding of anarchy neglects how global power is spatially organised and exercised. While there is no overarching single authority, the notion of nearly 200 fragmented and hostile units errantly oversimplifies the world and conceals emerging patterns of cooperation. This paper introduces soft anarchy as a corrective: a vision of the international system where anarchy remains the central structure, but is increasingly mediated by regional consolidation. Rather than viewing global politics as a network of self-contained sovereign states, soft anarchy suggests a framework in which authority is “zipped” into regional clusters — 7 to 9 functional blocs composed of cooperating states. These blocs are not sovereign-less; they serve to streamline sovereignty into less chaotic and more durable structures.

In this newly organised configuration, the international order is not ruled by a world state, nor does it exist in purely Hobbesian anarchical self-help terms. Instead, the system is progressing toward a form of multilayered governance where regional powers function as semi-autonomous stabilisers. These regional organisations counterbalance disparities in power, promote mechanisms of trust, and facilitate cooperative action in a plethora of domains such as trade, climate, migration, and security. These regional units



do not fully resolve anarchy, but transform it—from an unregulated contest of all against all to bounded pluralism where sovereignty is not relinquished but is exercised in relation to others (Bull, 1977; Wendt, 1992).

Figure 1. International Anarchical System (Hard Anarchy)



Source: Created by authors

Figure 2. International Anarchical System (Soft Anarchy)



Source: Created by Authors



The joint resilience of regions and states, accompanied by strong regional integration, defines soft anarchy. The Morgenthau power theory is limited to the perceptions of dividing power within states rather than governments clustering and sharing power through regional orders. This shift offers new room to navigate between the idealism of cosmopolitan governance and classical realism. As Kenneth Waltz claimed, states are forced to maximise their capabilities due to the survival instinct in anarchy, while soft anarchy counters that survival may also rely on strong regional interdependencies (Waltz, 1979).

This study employs a conceptual-analytical approach based on three frameworks: (1) structural realism, to ground the argument within the enduring logic of anarchy; (2) constructivism, specifically Wendt's assertion that "anarchy is what states make of it" (Wendt, 1992, p. 395), to posit that softening anarchy is a matter of agency; and (3) a historical-institutionalist perspective to show the evolution of regional organizations as responses to systemic fragmentation and hegemonic exhaustion (Ruggie, 1993). The analysis, however, sustains the focus on empirical developments: the EU's legal-political machinery, ASEAN's informal consensus culture, and the AU's efforts at continental solidarity.

This study does not seek to regionalize the world any more than it is, nor negate competition between geopolitical forces. It seeks, instead, to reconstruct the international system not as a brutalized stage of 193 disconnected sovereigns, but as a contested and dynamic order of intersecting regional frameworks. In doing so, it attempts to shift focus from the binaries of order versus anarchy; state versus institution; sovereignty versus cooperation towards the edges of a more nuanced global anarchy.

To achieve empirical rigor and analytical precision, we now specify our methodological framework and the criteria guiding case selection. A transparent delineation of our regional examples serves to link the theoretical exposition of soft anarchy to a coherent, systematically justified evidentiary base.

Methodology and Case Selection

This investigation is primarily conceptual-analytical, deploying a theory-driven case illustration model to elucidate causal mechanisms (Ruggie, 1993; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). We integrate structural realism (Waltz, 1979) and constructivist ontologies (Wendt, 1992) within the tradition of the English School (Bull, 1977) and subsequently scrutinize our propositions through regional organizations deliberately chosen to maximize variation in institutional depth and norm-generating procedures.

Case-selection parameters.

We identify regional organizations along the following dimensions:

- a. Institutional density, measured by the richness of rules, organs, and adjudicative bodies;
- b. Normative procedures, contrasting consensus with majority rule (Rosamond, 2014; Jones, 2015);



- c. Policy ambit, encompassing security, trade, and social dimensions;
- d. Enforcement potential, combining monitoring mechanisms and sanctioning abilities (Hartzenberg, 2011);
- e. Inclusiveness of membership and the resulting distributional consequences;
- f. The presence and influence of a regional hegemon (Lake & Morgan, 1997; Reus-Smit, 2005); and
- g. Mutually reinforcing interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977).

Illustrative cases

- 1- The European Union displays high institutional density and employs qualified majority voting (Rosamond, 2014).
- 2- The Association of Southeast Asian Nations exhibits a low to medium density, relies on consensus, and adheres to a norm of non-interference (Acharya, 2001; Jones, 2015).
- 3- The African Union commands a continent-wide ambition, yet faces capacity constraints and is in the process of refining its legal machinery (Bala, 2017; Hartzenberg, 2011).

Caution in inference is warranted here. The examples provided are meant to clarify, not to catalogue completely; they chart regions where soft anarchy seems credible and regions where it falters. This approach trims conceptual uncertainty without venturing into overly broad claims.

Soft Anarchy: Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

Soft anarchy is best understood not as the negation of anarchy, but as its modulation — a reconfiguration of the anarchic condition through regional aggregation, institutional buffering, and functional cooperation. Whereas classical anarchy refers to the absence of a central authority over sovereign states — leading to a system governed by self-help and power balancing — soft anarchy acknowledges that this structural void is increasingly filled by regional platforms of coordination. These platforms do not impose hierarchy; rather, they act as filters that diffuse conflict, mediate competition, and enable shared governance in specific domains.

Soft Anarchy in the Triangle of Anarchy, Hierarchy, and the International Community

Instead of an endpoint of a spectrum, soft anarchy is situated as one vertex of a triangle formed by three forces: anarchy, hierarchy and the international system. Classically, anarchy equates to statelessness with no structure, while hierarchy is the centre-periphery distribution of authority found in empires or hegemonic stability models. The



international community embodies shared norms, values, and rules which transcend state egoism (Reus-Smit, 2005).

Soft anarchy retains these poles. It assumes the absence of global governance as a baseline condition, and opposes a globalised hierarchy as unjust, unsustainable, and morally bankrupt while accepting community engagement through regionalism – constructing legitimacy and order through politically defined bounded spaces which may be cultural, historical, or functional. Although these bounded spaces offer no substitute for global governance, they bolster pragmatic scaffolds toward approximating order in a profoundly disordered world.

Soft anarchy intersects and builds upon big umbrella theories of International Relations (IR) by reimagining anarchy from a universal chaotic concept to a regionally governable one. It combines elements of realism, constructivism, and the English School to depict a cooperative, multilayered and institutionally organised international system.

Kenneth Waltz's structural realism (1979) is still perceived as one of the most significant theories regarding the issue of international anarchy. Waltz emphasised that the structure of the international system, with its relations of anarchy and distribution of capabilities, determines the behaviour of states. From this view, self-help necessitated competition and reduced survival to a focal point of strategic bonding among states. The notion of soft anarchy, however, challenges this rigid formula. It accepts the framework restrictions that Waltz outlines, but does not permit all states a uniform reaction. Within regional frameworks, such as the European Union, security and survival are managed, albeit institutionally, on a collective basis—something that is greatly under-theorised. Moreover, soft anarchy, which assumes all states as functionally identical units, introduces functional differentiation and posits that some states enjoy sheltered regional arrangements while others have unrestricted exposure to structural forces.

In contrast, Hans Morgenthau's classical realism viewed international relations as an enduring struggle for dominance stemming from human nature (1948). Morgenthau's theory postulates that power is perpetually competitive and cannot be shared. In this framework, cooperation is weak and always subordinate to the pursuit of national interest. Soft anarchy departs from this line of reasoning by offering a redefined notion of power as a form of governance. In the context of regional institutions, power transcends mere control to encompass shared responsibility and collective resilience.

The justification for soft anarchy draws from Alexander Wendt's constructivist view, "anarchy is what states make of it" (1992). Soft anarchy tries to break off from depicting anarchy as a given and static, in a tangible substance, condition. It attempts to reframe it as a social structure based on collective norms and identities. Organisations such as ASEAN and the EU are crucial in changing hostile relationships into cooperative ones through identity construction and norm diffusion.

Hedley Bull in *The Anarchical Society* (1977), suggested that states partake in a form of sociation that is aligned to some societal norms of constitutive rules, diplomacy, and mutual recognition. Soft anarchy expands upon Bull's ideas but concentrates on the regions, thus moving the locus of order from global to regional. As global bodies like the UN suffer more restrictions, regional bodies take on the normative and regulatory functions that were once envisaged to be performed by a global society. In this context,



soft anarchy preserves the ethical and institutional spirit of Bull's work while restructuring its governance framework to decentralised, regionally rooted governance.

Philosophical and historical perspectives

The ideas of Hobbes, Rousseau, and Thucydides have irrevocably influenced the order of intellectual relations with their concepts on order, strife, and interaction, which have become the focal point of consideration. Soft anarchy is not an outright dismissal of these legacies, but rather attempts to resolve conflicts posited by them as a modern answer to the age-old Power vs Peace, Autonomy vs Authority, or Realism vs Idealism duality. In this manner, soft anarchy asserts itself as a philosophical advancement, no longer premised on the assumption of a continuing "Pax Americana," but instead drawing on lessons from the past to address the challenges of an institutionally fragmented and multipolar world.

From Hobbes' State of Nature to Regional Constraint

The defining work on the consequences of anarchy remains Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, published in 1651. In the absence of a supervising authority, people live in a state of constant dread of violent death. For a long time, this metaphor has been extended to the international level, where states are viewed as existing in a complete absence of a global sovereign, plunging into perpetual chaos. "War of all against all" rationalises a self-sustaining, militarised system based on deep-rooted distrust.

Hobbes provides the seeds of transformation as well. Instead of perpetual conflict, he proposes the social contract — a consensus which bestows surrender to a designated power in exchange for assurance. Even if such a *Leviathan* doesn't exist at the global scale, soft anarchy globalized reinterpretation of Hobbes' solution assumes not a singular sovereign but a sprinkled collection of agreements within regionally divided frameworks. In this case, these regional units do not act as absolute dominators, but as bounded contract rules. Government decreases unpredictability and volatility while stabilizing expectations as a miniature *Leviathan* in defined geographic and normative limits.

Soft anarchy does not disregard the Hobbesian system of thinking; it modifies it instead. Even in the absence of a singular *Leviathan*, the international order as a whole function through a network of semi-sovereign regional systems that uphold consent, constraint, and collective security. Thus, Hobbes' answer is not out of date; it has simply been regionalized.

Rousseau's General Will and the Emergence of Regional Identity

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, unlike Hobbes, framed political legitimacy as resting not in fear, but in the general will, which denotes a moral obligation that free and equal persons contractually commit to. Participation in a polity is collective and, thus, constitutes a shared political future. Therefore, his vision was deeply rooted in self-determination.



Soft anarchy draws upon this Rousseauian ethic with regard to shared purpose and regional identity. While the projection of general will may be difficult on a global scale, it can certainly be meaningfully cultivated within regional blocs. The European Union serves as an example; it is not a mere technocratic arrangement, but a political community under construction in which states, while retaining sovereignty, decide to pursue shared norms and a common future. The ASEAN bloc also marks an emerging consensus on regional norms grounded in the logic of consultation and non-interference.

Thus, soft anarchy provides a new interpretation of Rousseau: sovereignty is not abolished but reconfigured through voluntary regional agreements. These contracts come close to approximating the general will, but not in a universal manner; instead, within systems of functional coherence and normative convergence.

Regional organisations shaped by soft anarchy illustrate Rousseau's insight that freedom and unity are interdependent and mutually reinforcing through shared political identity, economic interdependence, and institutional memory.

Thucydides and the Dialectic of Power and Restraint

The realist preoccupation with power and vulnerability in international relations is grounded in Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War, particularly the Melian Dialogue: "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." However, today's international system contests this dualistic view. It is no longer depopulated, self-sufficient states existing in a flat anarchical system; rather, states increasingly dwell within hierarchical regional blocs, which resemble extended political families. Such entities, including the EU, ASEAN, and the African Union, transform threat perceptions and redistribute power within shared structures of governance.

In a regionally structured system, unilateral aggression remains costly for the unilateral aggressor, and as such, it would be deemed deviant behaviour. The logic behind the system of interdependence encourages the establishment of a legal equilibrium, as well as a latent collective identity, which mitigates the incentive of hegemony. Aggression from one state tends to provoke a bloc defence response not only because of alliance obligations, but also due to sociocultural expectations. The soft anarchy approach neutralises the balance of power, embracing scholarly asymmetries while working to counteract their influence through extensive collaboration.

This particular model represents the world as divided into regions where relations among countries, albeit softened through collective governance, remain hierarchical. There still exists a semblance of power, but it is increasingly diffused through the veil of institutional legitimacy. Regionalism not only constructs a policy framework within a region; it changes the rationality dynamics: intra-bloc rivalry becomes self-evidently irrational, while external subjugation becomes ever more elusive.

Considering the changes which have occurred in the international system, starting from Westphalia to the present-day post-hegemonic instability, it becomes apparent that multilateral sovereignty is both fragmented and fluid. This movement is accompanied by soft anarchy, which attempts to find balance between rigid nationalism and globalist utopia. Soft anarchy supports regionalism and multi-layered governance as responses to



disorder, where regional organisations act as stabilising anchors. Rather than intricate blueprints, soft anarchy makes do with layers of adaptive processes of interdependence created by countless actors who put in place overlapping frameworks of ordered structure within disorder.

Similarities and Differences Between Kant's Idea of Perpetual Peace and the Concept of Soft Anarchy

One of Kant's final philosophical works, *Perpetual Peace*, was published in 1795. In this work, Kant outlines a blueprint for a universal peace that would encompass all global citizens. *Perpetual Peace* is composed of six preliminary articles, three definitive articles, and several appendices. The work, in its essence, reflects a political ambition aimed at achieving lasting peace. Within the framework of political and ethical relations, Kant identifies the conditions under which perpetual peace might be attained. The six preliminary articles outlined in the first section of the work are as follows;

- I. No Treaty of Peace Shall Be Held Valid in Which There Is Tacitly Reserved Matter for a Future War
- II. No Independent States, Large or Small, Shall Come under the Dominion of Another State by Inheritance, Exchange, Purchase, or Donation
- III. Standing Armies (miles perpetuus) shall in Time Be Totally Abolished
- IV. National Debts Shall Not Be Contracted with a View to External Friction of States
- V. No State Shall by Force Interfere with the Constitution or Government of Another State
- VI. No State Shall, during War, Permit Such Acts of Hostility Which Would Make Mutual Confidence in the Subsequent Peace Impossible: Such Are the Employment of Assassins, Poisoners, Breach of Capitulation, and Incitement to Treason in the Opposing State

The second section of *Perpetual Peace* presents the definitive articles for achieving perpetual peace, which are as follows:

- I. The Civil Constitution of Every State Should Be Republican
- II. The Law of Nations Shall be Founded on a Federation of Free States
- III. The Law of World Citizenship Shall Be Limited to Conditions of Universal Hospitality

In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant discusses important concepts of reason, the state, citizenship, justice, law, legislation, and contract. He believes that the default state for individuals is one of possible conflict, meaning that peace is something that needs political and legal frameworks to be intentionally constructed. To Kant, individuals may be forced to follow laws in order to avoid conflict. This aligns with the theory of soft anarchy, which argues that the international system's natural state is one of dormant conflict without a central governing body. Soft anarchy stresses the need for regional cooperation and organizations in the promotion of order and stability to deal with this issue.



Both theories oppose hegemonic rule. Kant argues that no single state should dominate another, and soft anarchy opposes the structure of the UN Security Council and the hegemony of the five permanent members. Rather, soft anarchy favours a more decentralized governance model through regional systems such as the European Union, which operate on consensus or qualified majority voting.

Kant imagines a cosmopolitan legal framework founded on republican governments as well as a global federation of states. On the other hand, soft anarchy posits that while anarchy is persistent, it may be mitigated through rational institutional cooperation. The EU and NATO serve as examples for Kant's model. They provide more relevance and practicality than Kant's idealistic blueprint. To conclude, Kant's Perpetual Peace offers a distinctly utopian approach to global governance, while soft anarchy provides a more realistic, grounded approach which acknowledges the existence of anarchy and attempts to alleviate its prevalence.

Historical and Current Analyses of Regional Security Organisations

In the scope of international relations literature, two central criteria stand out in defining a region. The first is material or geographic, which locates a region spatially on the world map, most often a landmass or maritime area. From this perspective, a region is a bounded geographic space containing two or more states (Mansfield & Milner, 1999). The second criterion offers a more normative approach to regions, which, while still geography-based, focuses on a dominant recurring system of interactions in trade, security, and economics. These interactions are often due to common ethnic, cultural, or religious ties (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2002).

Scholars have observed that regional organisations and regional integration movements became more pronounced features of the international system after the 1950s (Fawcett, 2008). This was initially driven by Europe's desire to overcome, or mitigate, the impact of another brutal dispute in Europe after World War II, but the logic of regionalism eventually spread everywhere. The historical development of regionalism can be understood in two parts (Wunderlich, 2007). The first part, from the 1950s until the late 1980s, was characterised by the Cold War. The nature of international relations during this time was survival-centric. States concentrated on their very existence, like worrying about the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the deterrence strategy employed (Walt, 1991). All these gave rise to certain regional organisations like NATO, SEATO, CENTO, and the Warsaw Pact, which focused mostly on addressing these daunting security problems. Also, the EEC, while primarily aimed at economic integration, had a more critical agenda of enhancing and ensuring adequate security so that no conflict could arise in Europe (Erdoğan, 2008).

The second period, commencing in the 1980s, shifted focus from strategic priorities to more economic ones. With the relaxation of Cold War tensions and the rise of globalisation, the attention of regional organisations turned towards economies and trade. There was a growing perception that regional integration would increase the shared economic efficiency (Ateş, 2022). This period saw the creation of economic organisations such as NAFTA, GAFTA, MERCOSUR, and APEC. The EU, ASEAN, AU, and Arab League also deepened their frameworks to deal with comprehensive regional issues.



While proximity is still the primary consideration in the establishment of regional organisations, it is not the only one. More often, a combination of shared political, economic, and social objectives is more determinative. Today, regional organisations can be classified broadly into three main areas of concentration: political, economic, or security. Political organisations cover wider scope issues, economic organisations focus on fostering development and integration, while security organisations concentrate on collective defence from internal and external aggression (Ateş, 2022).

Soft anarchy in the context of security and military cooperation

One of the mainstream theories in international relations, realism, interprets the international system as an anarchic environment and considers states as the primary actors in this anarchic setting. These actors, due to the anarchic structure of the international system, seek to enhance their national power capabilities, leading to a pursuit of power maximisation. As a result, this transforms into a power struggle where "everyone is at war with everyone." Consequently, the "security dilemma" emerges (Tang, 2009). According to Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, a balance of power is necessary to prevent wars in an anarchic international system. It is assumed that the balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War prevented a potential hot conflict. The concept of Soft Anarchy also emphasises regional and collective security organisations as solutions to security issues arising from the anarchic structure of the international system.

The Concept of Collective Security in the Soft Anarchy Model

The concepts of Soft Anarchy and Collective Security can be viewed as complementary to each other. Collective security is a security strategy that provides deterrence. The concept of collective security is based on the idea that every state within the system has an equal right to security, and the goal is to ensure the security of all states. Collective security is achieved when each member state activates its security elements against a threatening state (Delahunty, 2007). The foundations of this concept of collective security can be traced back to Kant's *Perpetual Peace*. This approach, realised with the establishment of the League of Nations by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, is now represented by the United Nations. Collective security is based on the political positions of states with the aim of maintaining and preserving peace in matters concerning global security (Yilmaz, 2017)

In the concept of soft anarchy, collective security is achieved through regional security organisations rather than a global federation. Cooperation and regional organisations serve to mitigate hard anarchy and bring balance to the system. This balance also prevents any single state or a few states from dominating the entire international system. The concept of soft anarchy does not view security as a zero-sum game. The gain of one state should not result in the loss of others. Soft anarchy approaches security as a win-win situation. This reduces the security dilemma. To achieve this, cooperation, norms, and measures that enhance security are required. This makes collective security possible.



NATO, CSTO and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Regional Security Perspectives

This section focuses on the NATO, CSTO and SCO regional security organisations, detailing their formation and objectives on the basis of fostering cooperation and tackling common challenges within the region.

The North Atlantic Treaty explicitly marks 4th of April 1949, as NATO's founding date, having been signed by 12 members with 32 countries as part of the alliance. Its major goal is to safeguard the political and military freedom of all member states while upholding collective defence. As prescribed in Article five of the founding treaty, all members consider an armed conflict towards one member as an attack against the alliance and are bound to aid the conflicted partner, whether politically or militarily. This was only invoked during the 9/11 terror attacks on America (Sonmezoğlu et al., 2021; NATO, 2025). NATO's sole focus during the Cold War was combating the USSR's dominance and halting communism's expansion (Armaoğlu, 1988). Post-Cold War, NATO undertook new responsibilities of crisis management and peacekeeping, such as in Bosnia and Kosovo. Presently, NATO also deals with terrorism, energy and cyber threats, as well as the spread of arms (NATO, 2025).

Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan convened on May 15, 1992 and founded the CSTO in Tashkent. Article 4 of the treaty to establish the CSTO states that aggression against one member is aggression towards all. Although originally intended to foster political and military cooperation, the CSTO transformed into a regional organisation in 2002, at which point it also received observer status at the UN General Assembly. Its strategic priorities include collective defence, counterterrorism, border security, and rapid response to crises (CSTO, 2025).

Formed by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in 1996, the "Shanghai Five" became the SCO with the addition of Uzbekistan in 2001. While initially concentrating on border issues, the SCO's tasks broadened to fostering peace and stability as well as a just international order. Emphasis is placed on mutual trust, collective security, peaceful resolution of conflicts, and relations without confrontation. Its security agenda targets transnational threats, focusing on terrorism, radicalism, and separatism, termed by its members as the three main radical threats (Kutlu, 2021).

These organisations, as a collective unit, showcase the means by which regional frameworks deal with intricate cross-border conflict through provisions of collective defence, strategic cooperation, and adapting institutional methods based on the geopolitical situation.

Regional Military Cooperation and Its Impact on the Global Balance of Power

Regional security frameworks serve as important regional and global security actors in the development of new centers of power (Lake & Morgan, 1997). They also help forge alliances and counter prevailing powers. NATO during the Cold War strengthened Western alliance resistance towards the Soviet Union and reinforced U.S. global leadership (Walt,



1987). In response, socialist states formed the Warsaw Pact as a counterbalance to U.S. sway.

These organizations help foster a multipolar international system as they create distinct poles of power. Thus, NATO embodies the Western security structure's paralysis, while the Shanghai Cooperation Organization stands as an antithesis to the Western-centered disorder. Beyond mere cooperation on security, they provide normative frameworks and act as balancing mechanisms to address asymmetries of power.

Global organizations influence others through collaboration. For instance, NATO has worked with the United Nations on many missions. NATO's Operation Deliberate Force during the Bosnian war in 1995, followed by NATO's IFOR and SFOR commands enforcing the Dayton Agreement, is an example of this cross-institution collaboration (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2024). Also, NATO KFOR in Kosovo operated under the UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (Chesterman 2002). Furthermore, NATO's ISAF mission in Afghanistan under UN mandate demonstrates the intricate intertwining of local and global efforts toward achieving security and illustrates the globalization of "regionally integrated" security policies.

Regional Organizations and the Soft Anarchy Model

The processes of regionalization and global governance have both expanded the opportunities for collective action while maintaining state sovereignty. This situation depicts a preliminary stage in the erosion of the traditional paradigm of international anarchy. We witness the emergence of the European Union, ASEAN, and the African Union as an early or "childhood" phase of the soft anarchy model. After the Cold War, there was accelerating globalization, coupled with more complex international relations, which altered the conception of "region." In spite of this, a lot of the literature on regionalization still seems to be concerned with a static, bounded-by-geography definition. In contrast to this view, regions are always being transformed and redefined by economic and political as well as cultural processes (Levis & Wigen, 1997). Some (Mansfield and Milner, 1997) stress geographic proximity, while others define it strictly with preferential trade agreements (Winters, 1999).

The latest trends in regionalization are more complex than previously because they include both identity and integrity formation alongside economic and security considerations. The process follows "bottom-up" and "inside-out" patterns of ecological, economic, and security concerns. There has been a shift into a multipolar world order with the decline of American hegemony, which now includes significant non-state actor participation in regionalization (Hettne, 1999).

Global governance is defined as an arrangement of states, international organizations, private sectors, and civil societies that engage in sociopolitical decision-making at multiple levels. The paradigm of global governance emerged in the 1990s as a reaction to economic integration, post-socialist transitions, and the stagnation of the Western-centric order (Murphy, 2014: 23-24). However, the persistence of inadequate solutions to social injustice remains a challenge in broadening the scope of the concept.



There is now a much clearer relationship between global governance and regionalisation. They both involve multi-actor, multi-level frameworks that are distilled from local realities. Regional organizations, the European Union, and ASEAN strive to foster peace, democracy, human rights, and further economic integration. These regions enhance their governance structures in response to global challenges, like climate change, migration, and global health pandemics, which illustrates the interplay of regional and global governance systems.

In terms of explaining the evolution of membership norms, conceptual approaches are very useful for analyzing regional integration. Considered from a purely geographic or cultural standpoint, boundaries are negotiated through the interactions of member countries and supranational bodies. Through these negotiations, shared criteria are established which determine state eligibility for membership, thus providing strong political motivation at the time of application. There are two critical moments that I have not yet covered, and that have received inadequate scholarly attention: the moment when the members decide their criteria, and the moment they designate a certain state as eligible. These decisions are politically important, even if they are not legal norms (Thomas, 2021: 226).

The European Union represents a distinct and intricate model of regional integration. Beginning with the Paris Treaty of 1951, the EU grew through normative and institutional shifts into a system of multi-level governance. It incorporates European Commission legislative proposals, the Council and Parliament co-decision process, the President of the European Council's strategic direction, and authoritative jurisprudence from the European Court of Justice (Rosamond, 2014: 252). The EU moved beyond purely economic objectives to social rights and citizenship policies, which in turn altered the political and legal order. Deepened integration occurred through the 1957 Rome Treaties, the 1965 Merger Treaty, and then the Maastricht Treaty, which expanded integration into areas previously considered sovereign. Still, issues of democratic legitimacy, social opposition, and differentiated integration demonstrate the EU's flexible and multi-layered nature (Rosamond, 2014: 253–254). With regard to competitive and financial services, environmental protection, and competition, the EU remains a global normative power (Rosamond, 2014: 256–258).

Other regional models like ASEAN and the African Union (AU) provide alternative pathways. ASEAN has realized considerable integration with its "ASEAN way." It achieves integration through consensus, emphasized consultation and non-interference (Korwatanasakul, 2020; Ting & Yongkun, 2023). ASEAN has also enhanced regional stability and prosperity through the ASEAN Free Trade Area and ASEAN Economic Community, which facilitates the free movement of goods, services, investment, and skilled labor (Durahman, 2016; Prajanto, 2022). It is also ASEAN's "open regionalism" policy that builds relationships with the rest of the world's economic superpowers (Pangestu & Ing, 2016).

The African Union (AU) has wider political and economic goals like achieving continental integration and enhancing global relevance (Bala, 2017). Strengthening democracy, governance, and development is further enabled by the Pan-African Parliament and African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, as well as the African Union Commission. The AU is active in politics and security, concentrating on preventative and remedial



measures concerning conflicts. In addition, the AU encourages integration through the African Continental Free Trade Area (Hartzenberg, 2011).

These regional frameworks defy conventional definitions of sovereignty and illustrate the interaction of regionalism, national self-determination, and global integration (Holsti, 2016; He, 2004). The relationship is further heightened by technological innovations and economic interdependence, which serve as both centripetal and centrifugal forces (Baluev, 2014). EU, ASEAN, and Mercosur regional blocs amplify bargaining power, although some transfer of authority is required (Pentland, 1975). There is still a lack of balance in power and structural constraints; nonetheless, these models serve as early indicators of "soft anarchy," where some cooperative order is obtainable without complete surrender of sovereignty. Should integration proceed, a future where soft anarchy is more fully realized is possible.

Conclusion and Discussion

The international system is still formally anarchy, but now exists within a network of states, regional blocs and transnational relations that is more intricate and interconnected than ever. The soft anarchy model reclassifies this intricacy as not a loss of sovereignty but a collective recalibration. Instead of absorbing anarchy through a single central authority, it fosters cooperative regional clusters where power is shifted, tempered, and redistributed.

"Strong vs. weak" distinctions become irrelevant within this framework, as once smaller states are able to exert their influence, greater traditional structures provide access. The EU, ASEAN, and African Union are examples of regional organisations that serve as new forms of post-Westphalian order, lessening unilateralism and conflict. Order is maintained without hierarchy within semi-autonomous, interlinked regions, as soft anarchy propagates the horizontal distribution of power.

Soft anarchy reconceptualises economic and security disorder in the international system as an arena in which overlapping regional norms and governance networks, rather than a singular global authority, stabilise order while preserving state autonomy. Our integrative model combines realist constraints (Waltz 1979) concerning the anarchically competitive logic of survival; ontological securities and role conception (Wendt 1992); and normative society-building processes (Bull 1977). Regionally concentrated goods such as transnational trade security, counter-migration coordination, and uniform collective defence raise sufficiently shared external perceptions that actors can subordinate rival preferences to the management of common risks. Competently crafted regional institutions can then narrow transaction costs, fortify commitment credibility, and channel disputes into bounded adjudication. Structures that mediate between strict majority and pure consensus, independent verification that discourages opportunistic non-compliance, and redistributive mechanisms that mitigate asymmetries in gains together fortify the model's empirical purchase.

Nonetheless, soft anarchy encounters circumscribed applicability. Abstention on demanding consensus may incapacitate a region at critical junctures; a singular hegemon may skew institutional advantages and dictate asymmetrical costs; and indebtedness,



literacy, or bureaucratic capacity may continue to circumscribe enforcement and policy follow-through. Such weaknesses are magnified when intra-regional inequalities deny vulnerable members distributive access to the produce of cooperation, or when secured reputational legacies of historic conflict erode the reciprocal trust that reciprocity theorists and security communities presuppose. Awareness of these disequilibria remains vital, for the very governance frameworks that permit collective action may equally consolidate hegemonic order and consolidate defects of marginalisation if not continuously subjected to countervailing scrutiny and reform.

Scholarly attention should now turn to rigorously assessing the model's claims in diverse geographical contexts, prioritising the interplay between sovereignty pooling, institutional density, and the differential capacity of governance structures to mitigate conflict. For policymakers, the imperative is to construct regional frameworks in which collective engagement emerges as the rational baseline, underpinned by rules and redistribution mechanisms that render participation advantageous to every constituent state. If calibrated to the empirical preconditions of any given milieu, the logic of soft anarchy can furnish a credible trajectory toward regional stability—one that recognises the continuing presence of anarchy while directing its dynamics into institutionalised, just, and durable patterns of order.

References

- Acharya, A. (2001). *Constructing a security community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the problem of regional order* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Armaoğlu, F. (1988). *20. Yüzyıl Siyasi Tarihi: 1914–1980*. Ankara: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları.
- Ateş, D. (2022). *Uluslararası Örgütler; Devletlerin Örgütlenme Mantiği*. Bursa: Dora Yayınları.
- Bala, M. T. (2017). The challenges and prospects for regional and economic integration in West Africa. *Asian Social Science*, 13(5), 24. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v13n5p24>
- Baluev, D. (2014). Shifts in the meaning of sovereignty and applicability of the concept for analysis of contemporary world politics. *Asian Social Science*, 11(3), 212–217. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v11n3p212>
- Barnett, M., & Finnemore, M. (2004). *Rules for the world: International organisations in global politics*. Cornell University Press.
- Bull, H. (1977). *The anarchical society: A study of order in world politics*. Columbia University Press.
- Chesterman, S. (2002). Legality Versus Legitimacy: Humanitarian Intervention, the Security Council, and the Rule of Law. *Security Dialogue*, 33(3), 293–307.
- CSTA. (2025). *The Collective Security Treaty Organisation*. <https://en.odkb-csto.org/25years/> (E.T. 26.01.2025).
- Delahunty, J. R. (2007). Paper Charter: Self-defence and the failure of the United Nations Collective Security System. *Catholic University Law Review*, 56(3), 131.



- Elumbre, A. L. (2019). Conjunctures on "ASEAN citizenship" 1967–2017: Identities, ideas, institutions. *Asian International Studies Review*, 20(1), 63–89.
- Erdoğan, M. M. (2008). Türkiye ile Avrupa Ekonomik Topluluğu / Avrupa Birliği İlişkilerinde Değişmeyen Öncelikler. *Liberal Düşünce Dergisi* (52), 123–140.
- Fawcett, L. (2008). Regional Institutions. In P. D. Williams (Ed.), *Security Studies: An Introduction*. Routledge.
- Hartzenberg, T. (2011). Regional integration in Africa. *WTO Working Papers*. <https://doi.org/10.30875/fad9df15-en>
- He, B. (2004). East Asian ideas of regionalism: A normative critique. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 58(1), 105–125. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1035771032000184791>
- Hettne, B. (1999). The new regionalism: A prologue. In B. Hettne, A. Inotai, & O. Sunkel (Eds.), *Globalism and the new regionalism: Volume 1* (pp. xv–xxix). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hettne, B., & Söderbaum, F. (2000). Theorising the Rise of Regionness. *New Political Economy*, 5(3), 457–472. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713687778>
- Hobbes, T. (1996). *Leviathan* (R. Tuck, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1651). <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511817700>
- Holsti, K. J. (2016). Internationalism and nationalism within the multi-community state. In *Major texts on war, the state, peace, and international order* (Vol. 42, pp. 105–126). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-28818-5_8
- Jones, D. M. (2015). ASEAN and the limits of regionalism in Pacific Asia. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2569176>
- Kant, I. (1917). *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay* (3rd ed.). London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- Keohane, R. O., & Nye, J. S. (1977). *Power and interdependence: World politics in transition*. Little, Brown and Company.
- Korwatanasakul, U. (2020). Revisiting Asian economic integration: Challenges and prospects. *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy*, 27(2), 199–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13547860.2020.1840493>
- Kutlu, E. (2021). İkili Anlaşmadan Bölgesel İşbirliğine: Şangay İş birliği Örgütü. *Avrasya Sosyal ve Ekonomi Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 8(3), 533–553.
- Lake, A. D., & Morgan, M. P. (1997). *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World*. Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press.
- Levis, M. W., & Wigen, K. E. (1997). *The myth of continents: A critique of metageography*. University of California Press.
- Mansfield, E. D., & Milner, H. V. (1997). *The political economy of regionalism*. Columbia University Press.
- Mansfield, E. D., & Milner, H. V. (1999). The New Wave of Regionalism. *International Organisation*, 53(3), 589–627. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2601291>



- Morgenthau, H. J. (1948). *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Murphy, C. N. (2014). The emergence of global governance. In T. G. Weiss & R. Wilkinson (Eds.), *International organisation and global governance* (pp. 23–34). Routledge.
- NATO. (2025). *Atlantic Treaty Organisation*. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_68144.htm? \(E.T. 25.03.2025\).](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_68144.htm? (E.T. 25.03.2025).)
- NATO. (2025). *Past operations and missions*. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52060.htm \(E.T. 25.03.2025\).](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52060.htm (E.T. 25.03.2025).)
- North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. (2024, March 21). *Peace support operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1995–2004)*. NATO. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52122.htm
- Pangestu, M., & Ing, L. Y. (2016). ASEAN: Regional integration and reforms. *Asian Economic Papers*, 15(2), 44–60. https://doi.org/10.1162/asep_a_00424
- Pentland, C. (1975). The regionalisation of world politics: Concepts and evidence. *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis*, 30(4), 599–630. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40201270>
- Prajanto, B. (2022). Impact of ASEAN economic integration on investment in the ASEAN region. *Journal of Asia Pacific Studies*, 6(2), 115–126. <https://doi.org/10.33541/japs.v6i2.4165>
- Reus-Smit, C. (2005). Liberal hierarchy and the license to use force. *Review of International Studies*, 31(S1), 71–92. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210505006708>
- Rosamond, B. (2000). *Theories of European integration*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rosamond, B. (2014). The European Union. In T. G. Weiss & R. Wilkinson (Eds.), *International organisation and global governance* (pp. 251–264). Routledge.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (2012). *The social contract* (C. Betts, Trans.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1762).
- Ruggie, J. G. (1993). Territoriality and beyond: Problematizing modernity in international relations. *International Organisation*, 47(1), 139–174. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300004702>
- Sonmezoğlu, F., Güneş, H., & Keleşoğlu, E. (2021). *Uluslararası İlişkilere Giriş*. İstanbul: Der Yayınları.
- Tang, S. (2009). The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis. *Security Studies*, 18(3), 587–623.
- The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. (2025). *General Information*. [https://eng.sectsco.org/20170109/192193.html \(E.T. 01.2025\).](https://eng.sectsco.org/20170109/192193.html (E.T. 01.2025).)
- Thomas, D. C. (2021). *The limits of Europe: Membership norms and the contestation of regional integration*. Oxford University Press.
- Thucydides. (1996). *The Peloponnesian War* (R. Warner, Trans.; M. I. Finley, Ed.). Penguin Classics. (Original work written ca. 400 BCE).



- Ting, C., & Yongkun, L. (2023). Why can ASEAN promote sustainable development cooperation? *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, 66(2). <https://www.scielo.br/j/rbpi/a/WMMptQpGYQy8pSJ3f4QY5Qz/?lang=en>
- Walt, S. M. (1987). *The origins of alliances*. Cornell University Press.
- Walt, S. M. (1991). The Renaissance of Security Studies. *International Studies Quarterly*, 35(2), 211–239. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600471>
- Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. McGraw-Hill.
- Wendt, A. (1992). Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics. *International Organisation*, 46(2), 391–425. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027764>
- Winters, L. A. (1999). Regionalism vs. multilateralism. In R. Baldwin, D. Cohen, A. Sapir, & A. Venables (Eds.), *Market integration, regionalism, and the global economy* (pp. 5–49). Cambridge University Press.
- Wunderlich, J. U. (2008). *Regionalism, Globalisation and International Order: Europe and Southeast Asia* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315604459>
- Yılmaz, S. (2017). *Uluslararası Güvenlik*. İstanbul: Kaynak Yayınları.

INSTITUTIONAL BALANCING AS DIPLOMACY: TÜRKİYE'S DUAL-TRACK ENGAGEMENT IN A MULTIPOLAR ORDER

SAMI KIRAZ

samikiraz@hitit.edu.tr

Assoc. Prof., Hitit University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of
International Relations (Turkey). <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6987-9856>

NAIL ELHAN

nailelhan@hitit.edu.tr

Assoc. Prof., Hitit University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of
International Relations (Turkey). <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5058-0280>

Abstract

This study analyses Türkiye's foreign policy strategy within the framework of institutional balancing theory, a period marked by the increasing prominence of multipolarity and institutional pluralism in the post-Cold War international system. In the study, Türkiye's increasing interaction with regional institutional structures, such as the SCO and OTS, while maintaining its relations with Western-centred institutions like NATO and the EU, is examined in the context of its search for strategic autonomy. Türkiye's dual-track foreign policy approach is evaluated not only as an axis shift but as a multi-vector and multi-layered foreign policy model. Theoretically, based on the institutional balancing approach developed by Kai He, this study reveals that Türkiye employs both inclusive and exclusive institutional strategies to limit the influence of great powers. In this context, Türkiye's historical relations with NATO and the EU, as well as its institutional orientations within the framework of the SCO and OTS, are comparatively examined, and it is claimed that it is seeking balance at the military, diplomatic, economic, and normative levels. Along with being a passive regional actor, Türkiye's strategy demonstrates its multifaceted foreign policy approach and its emergence as a middle power that actively participates in the normative and structural processes of the international system. In this context, Türkiye's institutional balancing practices provide an important example for understanding the new roles that medium-sized states can play in the changing international order.

Keywords

Institutional Balancing, Turkish Foreign Policy, Multi-layered Diplomacy, Emerging Middle Powers, Western and Regional Institutions.

Resumo

Este estudo analisa a estratégia de política externa da Turquia no âmbito da teoria do equilíbrio institucional, um período marcado pelo aumento da proeminência da multipolaridade e do pluralismo institucional no sistema internacional pós-Guerra Fria. No estudo, a crescente interação da Turquia com estruturas institucionais regionais, como a SCO e a OTS, mantendo as suas relações com instituições centradas no Ocidente, como a OTAN e a UE, é examinada no contexto da sua busca por autonomia estratégica. A abordagem de política externa de dupla via da Turquia é avaliada não apenas como uma mudança de eixo, mas como um modelo de política externa multivetorial e multifacetado. Teoricamente, com



base na abordagem de equilíbrio institucional desenvolvida por Kai He, este estudo revela que a Turquia emprega estratégias institucionais inclusivas e exclusivas para limitar a influência das grandes potências. Neste contexto, as relações históricas da Turquia com a OTAN e a UE, bem como as suas orientações institucionais no âmbito da SCO e da OTS, são examinadas comparativamente, e afirma-se que ela procura o equilíbrio nos níveis militar, diplomático, económico e normativo. Além de ser um ator regional passivo, a estratégia da Turquia demonstra a sua abordagem multifacetada da política externa e a sua emergência como uma potência média que participa ativamente nos processos normativos e estruturais do sistema internacional. Neste contexto, as práticas de equilíbrio institucional da Turquia fornecem um exemplo importante para compreender os novos papéis que os Estados de média dimensão podem desempenhar na ordem internacional em mudança.

Palavras-chave

Equilíbrio institucional, política externa turca, diplomacia multifacetada, potências médias emergentes, instituições ocidentais e regionais.

How to cite this article

Kiraz, Sami & Elhan, Nail (2025). Institutional Balancing as Diplomacy: Türkiye's Dual-Track Engagement in a Multipolar Order. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 169-186. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.9>

Article submitted on 29th May 2025 and accepted for publication on 29th September 2025.





INSTITUTIONAL BALANCING AS DIPLOMACY: TÜRKİYE'S DUAL-TRACK ENGAGEMENT IN A MULTIPOLAR ORDER

SAMI KIRAZ

NAIL ELHAN

Introduction

The international system has evolved into a multi-centred and dynamic structure in the distribution of power and the functioning of institutions after the Cold War. The increasing questioning of the unipolar order led by the U.S. has shifted towards new strategic pursuits and alternative alliance structures at both regional and global levels. This transformation heralds a period in which emerging and medium-sized powers, especially, are turning to balancing great power influence with more flexible, multi-layered, and institutional tools instead of direct military confrontation. This tendency is explained by the concept of "institutional balancing" and refers to the strategies developed by states through institutions to limit the influence of great powers.

This study examines the institutional balancing practices in the context of Türkiye's multi-level foreign policy strategy. Türkiye's foreign policy orientation is evaluated not only as an axis shift from the West to the East but as a multi-vector, flexible and strategic autonomy-focused diplomacy to maximise its interests. While Türkiye continues its relations with Western-centred institutions such as NATO and the European Union (EU), it also turns to alternative regional institutional structures such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) and increasingly develops engagement with these structures. This strategy allows Türkiye to redefine its position in the international system and protect its security and economic interests on multilateral platforms.

In this context, the study seeks answers to the following fundamental questions: Why and how does Türkiye develop engagement with alternative regional institutions while maintaining its position in Western-centred institutional structures? What forms of institutional balancing theory do Türkiye's relations with institutions such as the SCO and OTS overlap with? How does Türkiye's multi-level institutional strategy shape its status in the international system, regional influence, and search for strategic autonomy?

The study's theoretical framework, which aims to address these issues, is founded on Kai He's institutional balancing method. To minimise the impact of big powers or safeguard their own interests, governments try to reform current institutions or lead the creation of new regional structures. Türkiye's continuation of its relations with NATO and the EU,



while increasing its interaction with institutions such as the SCO and the OTS, can be considered an empirical example of this theoretical approach.

The study evaluates Türkiye's institutional engagements with NATO and the EU historically and contextually. Then, it analyses its alternative regional institutional orientations within the SCO and the OTS framework. This comparative analysis reveals that Türkiye simultaneously adopts inclusive and exclusive institutional balancing forms and has a strategic orientation to increase its autonomy within the multipolar system. The findings reveal that Türkiye is trying to establish institutional balance not only in the military but also at diplomatic, economic, and normative levels. Comparable strategies are visible beyond Türkiye. India's concurrent engagement with BRICS, Indonesia's ASEAN-centric multilateralism, and Brazil's regional institutionalisation for status politics each illustrate a wider pattern of dual-track institutional leverage. Framing Türkiye within this global repertoire clarifies both its commonalities and its specific mix of instruments.

As a result, Türkiye's institutional strategy reflects a multi-layered foreign policy model that enables it to both maintain its engagement with traditional Western structures and to take an active role in alternative institutionalisation processes at the regional level. This model shows that Türkiye is positioned not only as a passive actor in the international system but also as an "emerging middle power" that intervenes in normative and structural transformation processes. Rather than depicting Türkiye as merely defensive, this article shows that institutional balancing simultaneously constrains great-power influence and enables game-setting behaviour. In the Turkish case, NATO/EU function as channels of inclusive balancing, while SCO/OTS operate as exclusive balancing; together, they yield not only constraint but also status enhancement and a broader autonomy-producing policy space. The remainder of the study will discuss the empirical implications of this strategy in detail.

Theoretical Framework and Its Relevance

The traditional balance of power theory claims that states try to balance against their rivals by forming alliances or arming themselves to ensure security (Waltz, 1979: 127). Although there is a general acceptance in the literature that states follow balancing strategies, it is argued that balancing can be achieved for different reasons (threat balancing) (Walt, 1985) or with various methods (Pape, 2005; David, 1991; Paul, 2005). In the post-Cold War era, states favoured cost-effective and flexible strategies over direct military balancing as the international economic system became more integrated. In this context, institutional balancing emerged, describing how emerging powers use international and regional institutions to enhance their standing and mitigate great powers' influence (He, 2008). This transition also underlines a theoretical shift: whereas balance of power and balance of threat approaches in the realist tradition primarily emphasise military capabilities and threat perceptions, institutional balancing—drawing on a more liberal understanding—highlights the role of institutions in shaping state behaviour. In today's interconnected order, where direct military balancing is costly and often counterproductive, institutional balancing provides a more convincing explanation of how states seek influence and security through multilateral frameworks.



Emerging powers in the international system develop strategies to gain more influence and status and reflect their regional priorities within the dominant order without completely rejecting the norms and institutions of the existing order. One of these strategies is institutional balancing, which enables power competition within the system to be conducted through softer institutional tools, thereby avoiding military conflict.

Theoretically, this approach is based on the institutional balancing theory developed by Kai He. According to this theory, emerging powers aim to strengthen their positions within the international system not by directly challenging the military dominance of great powers but by engaging with multilateral international and regional institutions (He, 2008: 492). This approach seeks to ensure their security while also working towards establishing a more equitable global order. It is argued that this balancing strategy is used to achieve the following goals: Balancing global power asymmetries, seeking international status, and establishing regional leadership. Emerging powers try to balance the institutional advantages of great powers by turning to regional organisations to overcome the limitations they face in Western-centred international institutions for various reasons. Moreover, the gains achieved also bring symbolic gains such as recognition and prestige to these states. Thus, the limitations and limited influence in the system are increased through flexible and regional structures designed to suit their positions (He, 2022: 1112).

Institutional balancing occurs in two forms: inclusive, where a targeted power's influence is limited through norms within institutions that include it, and exclusive, where a rival is prevented from participation in new or alternative structures (He, 2008: 493). Emerging powers favour these strategies for security, cost-effectiveness, and sustainability. This approach gains legitimacy in contexts where military force is less preferred (He and Feng, 2020: 493). Türkiye exemplifies this framework by maintaining ties with Western institutions like NATO and the EU while also pursuing regional priorities through organisations like OTS and SCO. Thus, Türkiye is not simply an emerging power distancing itself from the West but rather balancing its interests through bilateral engagement and a multi-level foreign policy strategy.

The international system after the Cold War and in the 21st century has significantly impacted institutional balancing, becoming a widespread balancing strategy. As a result, the US-led short-term liberal order has developed into a more intricate and multipolar framework (Peters, 2023: 1653). This dynamic results from changes in the distribution of material power and is also impacted by expanding debates on the validity and operation of the existing institutional framework. As a result, not only the major powers but also the emerging ones now possess the ability to shape the institutional framework within this new multipolar system. The new multipolar environment shows that the distribution of power is concentrated in multiple centres, and the hegemonic superiority of a single actor has disappeared (Peters, 2023: 1661-62). This transition process has required re-establishing the balance of power, redefining institutional arrangements, and creating new norms and rules. This situation points to a phase in which the emerging powers have mainly taken on new roles: demands for reform in existing institutions and the search for an alternative order through new institutions. Based on the claim that the current order is Western-centred and under the control of Western states, the emerging powers' demands for more active participation in decision-making processes and the



desire to determine new norms are on the agenda of contemporary international politics (Stephen, 2017: 490). On the other hand, situations where existing limitations cannot be overcome lead emerging powers to turn to options such as building regional or thematic institutions under their leadership or engaging with existing non-Western institutions. Thus, the institutional basis of multipolarity is strengthened by creating institutional pluralism.

In this context, it becomes clear that emerging powers' basic strategy is institutional balancing. This more complex strategy is now implemented to balance the hegemon and shape cooperation or competition behaviours with other emerging powers. Therefore, the general character of the new multipolar system is evolving not only into military or economic but also into institutional competition and normative struggle.

Türkiye's strategy, presented in the next section, provides a unique example of this approach. Türkiye, which pursues a dual strategy, continues its NATO membership and EU candidacy process on the one hand. On the other hand, it created new relationships with SCO and led the way in the creation of regional organisations like OTS. This strategy strengthens Türkiye's economic and security interests while fostering a multifaceted identity in a multipolar environment. By aiming to be a more active player in the international order, Türkiye and other emerging powers seek to influence the system's normative and administrative structures through various institutional engagements.

The dual strategy and the inclusive and exclusive institutional balancing approaches significantly impact emerging powers' roles in international politics. According to the general approach in the literature, it is claimed that the balancing strategy pursued through Western-centred institutions and non-Western structures brings two different roles to emerging powers: complementary and competitive roles (Roy, 2022: 5; Voeten, 2017; Hettne and Söderbaum, 2006). According to the complementary role approach, while Western-centred international institutions aim to set norms and provide solutions to global problem areas, regional institutions are motivated to respond to individual needs through geographical, cultural and political goals. For this reason, a division of labour emerges between the two types of institutional structures. When evaluating the institutions with which Türkiye is engaged, NATO envisions a security architecture based on collective security and deterrence. However, it cannot create flexibility for its members' different regional security perspectives. Similarly, the EU, while presenting an economic and political integration model, may conflict with the individual economic and political realities of its members. In this context, new regional institutions such as OTS provide alternative multilateral platforms in terms of regional solidarity, soft power practices, and the construction of a common identity; and the SCO provides alternative multilateral platforms in areas such as regional security cooperation and energy diplomacy with a Eurasia-centred perspective.

On the other hand, the competitive role approach claims that newly established or institutionalised regional institutions are alternative structures developed for emerging powers experiencing global representation crises or unable to find solutions to their problems. In alternative ways, these organisations serve as hubs for regional influence and institutional agendas. It is widely acknowledged that these two positions can live peacefully. When viewed from the example of Türkiye, both being a permanent and active member of NATO and maintaining its relations with the EU at a strategic level reflect



Türkiye's traditional approach. However, taking a leading position in the TDT and developing institutional relations with the SCO provides the opportunity to produce new solutions to the problems encountered and, simultaneously, flexibility, diversity, and autonomy in its foreign policy strategy. Therefore, Türkiye's institutional balance strategy can be evaluated as combining complementary and competitive approaches.

In summary, the theory of institutional balancing offers a strong framework to explain the strategies and choices of emerging powers within international and regional organisations. For Türkiye, maintaining its position in existing institutions (such as NATO and the EU) and deepening relations with alternative formations (such as the TDT and the SCO) reflect a multi-layered and multifaceted strategy. The use of inclusive and exclusive institutional balancing strategies together and assuming both complementary and competitive roles at the same time shows that Türkiye is an active emerging power that tries to shape the norms and functioning of the order of the changing international system. In the next section, the foreign policy reflections of Türkiye's different institutional engagements and strategies will be examined empirically through this theoretical framework.

Türkiye's Engagement with Western Institutions

As an emerging middle power, Türkiye follows a dual foreign policy engaging both Western and non-Western institutions. Institutional balancing suggests that states use international organisations to offset great power influence through cooperation rather than confrontation. Regionalisation similarly stresses collaboration among proximate states within the global system (Held et al., 2004: 19). In today's order, globalisation and stronger regional dynamics push states toward multi-layered strategies.

This dual strategy is reflected in Türkiye's EU candidacy and NATO membership. It cultivates regional connections through the OTS and the SCO while simultaneously pursuing security and legitimacy through Western institutions. This approach seeks to advance national interests on several levels while striking a balance between big powers and regional alternatives rather than indicating an "axis shift." Through the prisms of regionalisation and institutional balance, the following sections examine the tenets and difficulties of Türkiye's NATO membership and its EU accession path.

Türkiye's NATO Membership

Amid post-World War II security concerns and a desire to connect with the West, Türkiye joined NATO in 1952. Faced with Soviet pressure over the Straits and eastern borders, Ankara turned decisively toward the Western bloc. U.S. support under the 1947 Truman Doctrine reinforced Türkiye's role as a key barrier to Soviet expansion (McGhee, 1990: 21). Having stayed neutral during most of the war, Türkiye abandoned this stance as Cold War tensions grew. To meet Western expectations, it accelerated democratic reforms and economic liberalisation. Despite doubts about its democratic maturity, Türkiye's dispatch of troops to Korea in 1950 and its heavy losses there were decisive in gaining NATO's approval (Zürcher, 2005: 235). It became a full member in February 1952, just three years after NATO's creation.



Türkiye's main strategic goal in joining NATO was to secure protection against the Soviet Union under the Alliance's collective defence, particularly through Article 5's guarantee of U.S. and European support (Ünlühisarcıklı, 2019). Membership also affirmed Türkiye's political and identity-based alignment with the West, solidifying its role as a frontline state (Oğuzlu, 2013: 3). This integration enhanced its international status and accelerated military modernisation through aid, equipment, and training (Ünlühisarcıklı, 2019). As a full member, Türkiye also gained a platform to assert its security priorities within NATO decision-making structures (Ünlühisarcıklı, 2019).

Türkiye has played a key military and strategic role in NATO (Oğuzlu, 2013: 3). Its geography made it a forward post on the Alliance's southern flank during the Cold War. With NATO's second-largest army, Türkiye helped deter Soviet expansion from the 1950s to the 1980s. Bases like İncirlik were central to NATO operations; the Jupiter missiles deployed there, for example, were crucial in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Turkish airspace and intelligence infrastructure also provided vital surveillance against Soviet activities.

Since the Cold War's end, Türkiye has supported NATO's evolving missions. In the 1990s, it contributed to UN-backed peacekeeping in Bosnia and Kosovo. Post-2001, Türkiye twice led ISAF in Afghanistan and maintained troops there for years (Ünlühisarcıklı, 2019). It supported NATO's 2011 Libya mission with logistics and naval assets and hosted Patriot missiles against threats from Iraq and Syria. Türkiye also provided an early-warning radar for NATO's missile defence. These efforts reflect its continued commitment as a contributor, not just a beneficiary, within the Alliance. Türkiye's NATO role includes key political engagement alongside its military contributions. Despite the 1974 Cyprus intervention and ensuing U.S. arms embargo, Türkiye upheld alliance solidarity. Even during the 1980s military coup, NATO membership remained central to its foreign policy, reinforcing international legitimacy (Kınacıoğlu, 2017). Due to this stance, Türkiye's regional influence has grown, allowing it to manage disputes in the Middle East and the Caucasus while preserving its reputation as a trustworthy Western ally.

Türkiye's relations with NATO countries have become more strained in recent years. Its security emphasis changed after the Cold War from the Soviet threat to Middle Eastern instability and PKK terrorism (Ünlühisarcıklı, 2019). NATO's limited response to these concerns led to doubts about its relevance. The 1991 Gulf War and 2003 Iraq War, for instance, created a power vacuum in northern Iraq exploited by the PKK, while U.S. support fell short of Turkish expectations (Ünlühisarcıklı, 2019). U.S. backing of the PYD/YPG in Syria—groups Türkiye links to the PKK—further deepened mistrust. These dynamics have pushed Türkiye to seek greater autonomy in addressing its security needs.

A major recent crisis in Türkiye-NATO relations was Ankara's 2017 purchase of Russia's S-400 air-defence system (Kıbaroğlu, 2019). After unsuccessful efforts to acquire U.S. Patriots on favourable terms, Türkiye turned to Moscow and received the first S-400 units in 2019, which was the first deployment of such a system by a NATO member. This move violated NATO protocols and raised concerns over interoperability and intelligence security (Ünlühisarcıklı, 2019). The U.S. claimed the S-400s jeopardised NATO systems, especially the F-35, and responded by excluding Türkiye from the F-35 program and



imposing sanctions. While some saw this as a pivot toward Russia, Ankara maintained its NATO commitment, citing national defence needs as the sole motive.

Beyond the S-400 dispute, Türkiye has clashed with NATO allies over Syria policy, Eastern Mediterranean issues, and democratic standards (Bardakçı, 2021). Tensions escalated after the 2016 coup attempt, with Western criticism growing over Ankara's cooperation with Russia and Iran through the Astana process, further straining alliance trust (Armutlu, 2023: 5). Regarding their positions on PKK/PYD activity, Türkiye postponed Sweden's and Finland's NATO bids in 2022 (Aslan, 2024: 750). Finland's membership was only accepted after certain security guarantees were obtained. This event confirmed Türkiye's ongoing strategic influence inside the Alliance and demonstrated how it uses the consensus rule of NATO to further its objectives.

There are two strategies reflected in Türkiye's present NATO stance. Ankara seeks strategic autonomy through deeper connections with non-NATO countries like China and Russia, even as it upholds Alliance unity and supports initiatives like NATO's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This reflects factors like Türkiye's reliance on Russian natural gas as well as geopolitical calculations. From an institutional-balancing view, Türkiye engages with NATO for security and legitimacy while using platforms like the SCO and BRICS to counterbalance Western influence. Erdoğan's "the world is bigger than five" rhetoric and participation in BRICS and SCO summits highlight Ankara's goal of asserting itself in a multipolar world.

A hybrid engagement paradigm that integrates both types of institutional balance is demonstrated by Türkiye's relationship with NATO. NATO membership served as a means of achieving both political and normative integration with the West and security assurances during the Cold War. It can be viewed as an illustration of inclusive institutional balance in this regard. Nevertheless, as security threats have changed and tensions with allies have increased in the post-Cold War era, Türkiye has begun looking into non-Western institutional options. Its participation in SCO and BRICS is indicative of an attempt to increase its strategic independence and is consistent with alternative or exclusive institutional balancing tactics meant to thwart Western limitations. Thus, Türkiye's involvement within the NATO framework demonstrates that institutional balancing is not limited to great powers but can also be flexibly employed by middle powers, which is an empirical contribution to the theoretical framework.

Türkiye's EU Accession Process

Türkiye's relationship with the EU has been intermittent, focused on economic and political integration rather than security. It began with Türkiye's 1959 application for associate membership in the European Economic Community (EEC), followed by the 1963 Ankara Agreement, which set a phased path toward full membership (Ünver Noi, 2025: 138–139). Article 28 of the Agreement proposed accession once relations had sufficiently advanced. The 1970 Additional Protocol laid the groundwork for a customs union and policy alignment. However, the 1971 military intervention and rising nationalist-leftist opposition to the EEC stalled momentum. After the 1974 Cyprus intervention, ties deteriorated further, and the process was suspended. Although relations improved in the 1980s, the 1980 coup and subsequent human rights concerns drew EU criticism (Akgül-



Açıkmeşe and Triantaphyllou, 2012). In 1987, the Özal government applied for full membership, but the 1989 Commission report rejected negotiations due to Türkiye's economic and democratic shortcomings. Still, by the early 1990s, relations had normalised. The end of the Cold War and the expansion of European integration changed the geopolitical positioning of Türkiye. Deep economic integration short of membership was fostered in 1995 when the Customs Union agreement matched Türkiye's external tariffs with the EU and provided Turkish industrial goods tariff-free access (Hale & Avcı, 2001).

A turning point came at the 1997 Luxembourg summit, which excluded Türkiye from the first wave of Eastern enlargements. This setback was reversed at the 1999 Helsinki summit, where Türkiye was granted candidate status (Müftüler-Baç, 2017: 421) "on equal footing" with other aspirants. Ankara responded with major reforms under the 2001 National Programme: abolishing the death penalty, expanding Kurdish-language broadcasting, and reducing military influence to meet the Copenhagen criteria. Recognising these steps, the 2004 Brussels European Council agreed to begin accession talks on 3 October 2005 (Öniş, 2003). Despite early momentum, negotiations stalled after 2006, mainly due to the Cyprus issue. Türkiye refused to recognise the Republic of Cyprus or open its ports until the EU lifted restrictions on Northern Cyprus (Tetik, 2021: 382). In response, the EU froze eight chapters. Subsequently, countries like France and Germany imposed further political blocks, proposing alternatives such as "privileged partnership." By the 2010s, talks had effectively stalled: only 16 of 35 chapters were opened, with no progress amid concerns over democratic backsliding and rule-of-law violations.

The 2016 coup attempt and ensuing emergency measures severely strained Türkiye-EU relations (Akçay & Deniz, 2022). The European Parliament recommended suspending accession talks, and by 2018, the Commission declared them effectively frozen (European Parliament, 2019). Although Türkiye remains a candidate, no meaningful progress has occurred since. Nevertheless, there were significant benefits to the process: EU-led reforms in the early 2000s improved both internal stability and international reputation. By supporting "zero problems" diplomacy, strengthening relations with Greece, and enabling Turkish support for the 2004 Cyprus referendum, these changes enhanced Ankara's reputation as a positive regional player (Öniş & Yılmaz, 2009: 9–10).

Türkiye's economic foreign policy has also been impacted by the EU process. By increasing trade and EU foreign direct investment, the 1996 Customs Union improved Türkiye's soft power and regional economic attractiveness. While the prospect of membership enhanced Türkiye's reputation as a democratic, Western-oriented country, conforming to EU criteria also helped relations with neighbours. This "model country" perception in the 2000s enabled Türkiye to project soft power in the Middle East and adopt a more confident foreign policy before the Arab Uprisings.

The EU process has given Türkiye diplomatic leverage. During the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015, Ankara utilised its candidate status to negotiate an agreement with the EU that includes negotiations on visa liberalisation, financial help, and an update to the Customs Union. This demonstrated how influence over regional issues may result from EU alignment. Additionally, perceptions of EU proximity improved Türkiye's credibility in the area of foreign policy. Frustration has been heightened by the slow admittance process,



though. Long-term delays have made people and elites more sceptical of Europe; by the 2010s, support for EU membership had drastically decreased (Aydın-Düzgit, 2016: 4). This change promoted a more independent, nationalist foreign policy and undermined Türkiye's Europe-focused diplomacy. Calls for "strategic autonomy" after 2010 reflect growing disillusionment with the EU path (Waldman & Çalışkan, 2017), prompting Ankara to focus more on its own regional agenda.

The EU accession process has also limited Türkiye's foreign-policy autonomy. As a candidate, Türkiye was expected to align with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, including sanctions on Iran and positions in the Middle East. Similarly, the 1996 Customs Union boosted trade but bound Türkiye to the EU trade policy. When the EU signed free-trade agreements with countries like South Korea or Canada, Türkiye had to open its market without gaining reciprocal access. Attempts to negotiate bilateral deals often failed, as these countries already benefited from duty-free entry. Thus, deep integration without membership came at a sovereignty cost: Türkiye followed rules it could not influence.

The prolonged and uncertain EU accession process has, at times, enabled democratic backsliding in Türkiye. While reform efforts were strong until 2005, stalled talks eroded momentum. From the 2010s, authoritarian tendencies deepened despite EU criticism, which lost influence as membership prospects dimmed. The weakening of the EU "anchor" harmed Türkiye's democratic image and raised concerns in the West. This uncertainty has contributed to Türkiye's turn toward more nationalist and isolationist policies.

With EU accession prospects fading, Türkiye has deepened ties with regional organisations. Erdoğan's 2013 remark, "Invite us into the Shanghai Five and we'll bid the EU farewell", reflected this pivot (Daily Sabah, 2013). Türkiye became a dialogue partner of the SCO in 2012 and has since engaged with BRICS, joining its 2022 BRICS+ meeting. As an active member and former chair of the OTS, Ankara has also reinforced cooperation with Turkic republics. These actions, which are occasionally viewed as EU alternatives, show an institutional balancing strategy: By strengthening its regional power and maintaining EU links, Türkiye positions itself as a major actor in a multipolar world.

Türkiye's dual engagement with NATO and the EU exemplifies institutional balancing: while NATO offers security and the EU provides normative and economic legitimacy, Ankara also cultivates strategic autonomy through ties with the SCO, BRICS, and the OTS. This approach reflects a flexible, multi-vector diplomacy suited to a middle power navigating a multipolar world (He, 2008). By expanding its influence through regional platforms and acting independently, Türkiye's actions demonstrate its intention to not only conform to Western ideals but also to widen institutional balancing beyond the military to encompass diplomatic and economic aspects.

Türkiye's Engagement with Non-Western Regional Institutions

Türkiye's foreign policy seeks multidimensional ties with both global and regional actors. Its involvement in the OTS and the SCO enhances regional influence while offsetting great power dominance. From institutional balancing and regionalisation perspectives,



such engagement expands Türkiye's geopolitical space. Notably, a 2022 survey named Türkiye the most trusted external actor in Central Asia (Purtaş, 2025: 115).

Türkiye's Relations with the Organisation of Turkic States

The OTS, founded in 2009 and renamed in 2021, functions as a regional cooperation platform. According to institutional-balancing theory, states use such bodies to counter rival powers (He, 2009: 17), while regionalisation refers to growing integration within specific geographies (Hurrell, 1995: 345). Led by Türkiye and framed by pan-Turkic rhetoric, the OTS aims to expand Ankara's strategic reach. Though Türkiye promotes itself as the leader of the Turkic world, invoking slogans like "from the Adriatic to the Great Wall," its engagement remains pragmatic. Pan-Turkism serves as a legitimising narrative, but cooperation is driven by political and economic interests (Krzyżanowska, 2024).

Pan-Turkist discourse provides the ideological foundation of the OTS, highlighting shared language, culture, and history among Turkic peoples. In Türkiye, it has gained traction in the 2020s, notably during support for Azerbaijan in the Karabakh conflict (Krzyżanowska, 2024; Matveev, 2025). Its broad societal appeal gives legitimacy to Türkiye's regional initiatives and is embraced across the political spectrum (Krzyżanowska, 2024). However, modern Pan-Turkism remains symbolic; Ankara avoids irredentism and respects sovereignty (Matveev, 2025). Even while supporting Turkic minorities such as Crimean Tatars and Uyghurs, Türkiye avoids taking any steps that would sour relations with Russia or China. Rather, Pan-Turkism serves as a cultural and public diplomacy instrument that strengthens Türkiye's position as the world's leading nation.

The OTS prioritises economic cooperation and transport connectivity, aiming to ease trade and develop transcontinental routes (Krzyżanowska, 2024). Following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which disrupted the Northern Corridor, the Middle Corridor via Türkiye gained strategic significance. OTS members have advanced Caspian transit projects to create a seamless Europe-Asia link, with Türkiye at the centre (Demir, 2022). A €10 billion commitment from international institutions in 2024 highlights the corridor's geoeconomic promise (European Commission, 2024). These efforts not only boost Türkiye's regional influence but also offer Central Asian states an institutional alternative to Russian dominance, reinforcing Türkiye's institutional balancing strategy (Krzyżanowska, 2024).

For Türkiye, the OTS functions as a geopolitical tool to strengthen its influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Regionalisation through the OTS enables Ankara to expand its institutional presence in Eurasia, alongside its Western ties. Granting observer status to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in 2022 demonstrates how Türkiye integrates its national interests into the organisation's agenda (Krzyżanowska, 2024). Similarly, naming Shusha the "cultural capital of the Turkic world" after Azerbaijan's Karabakh victory reflects how Türkiye and Azerbaijan advance shared goals within the OTS. These moves reinforce Turkish leadership while accommodating diverse member priorities.



While Türkiye leads the OTS, member states like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan maintain strategic balances with Russia, China, and the West. Türkiye's early recognition of these states in the 1990s did not translate into immediate regional influence. Kazakhstan resisted deeper integration in favour of a multi-vector policy, and Uzbekistan remained cautious of Türkiye's ambitions (Matveev, 2025). As a result, Türkiye's role is not hegemonic but based on soft power and consent (Wilson, 2023). Through TİKA aid, scholarships, and cultural diplomacy, Ankara has built influence and fostered long-term ties since the early 1990s (Krzyżanowska, 2024). The OTS thus operates as a flexible platform where pan-Turkic identity supports economic and diplomatic collaboration. In institutional-balancing terms, Türkiye uses the OTS to counter major powers through regional solidarity. From a regionalisation perspective, the OTS marks a new power centre, positioning Türkiye and its allies in the shifting global order.

The OTS represents a key platform for Türkiye's institutional balancing at the regional level. Through the OTS, Ankara builds institutional influence in Eurasia while aligning pan-Turkist discourse with its geopolitical and economic interests, reinforcing its multi-vector foreign policy. The OTS complements Türkiye's engagement with Western alliances by offering a regional counterweight and greater autonomy in Central Asia amid great-power competition. This scenario demonstrates that institutional balance is applicable to intermediate powers like Türkiye's attempts to establish regional order as well as to great powers.

Türkiye's Relations with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

Türkiye's involvement in the SCO is indicative of its multifaceted foreign strategy and emphasis on Eurasia. As a "dialogue partner" since 2012 (Güpgüpoğlu, 2019), Ankara has shown occasional interest in full membership. From an institutional balancing view, this engagement expands Türkiye's diplomatic space beyond Western alliances (He, 2009: 88). Regionally, it signals a strategy of embracing overlapping identities and alliances beyond its immediate neighbourhood.

Post-Cold War Eurasianist ideology in Türkiye has fueled calls to pivot away from the West (Aksu, 2022). Popular among nationalist circles, this discourse advocates exiting NATO, abandoning EU aspirations, and aligning with an "anti-imperialist" bloc led by Russia and China (Çolakoğlu, 2019). Figures like Doğu Perinçek argue that Türkiye is a subordinate in the Atlantic but an equal partner in Eurasia, urging ties with Moscow and Beijing. Eurasianists welcomed joint military exercises with China and the S-400 missile deal with Russia as steps against Western dominance (Çolakoğlu, 2019). From the mid-2010s, especially after the 2016 coup attempt and tensions with the West, the AK Party adopted elements of this outlook. In late 2016, amid stalled EU talks, President Erdoğan asked, "Why shouldn't Türkiye be in the Shanghai Five?" (Reuters, 2016), prompting concerns in the West. Being the first NATO member to join the SCO, full Turkish participation might change the internal dynamics of the alliance (Falk, 2022). Such discourse gave their stance some political validity by echoing Eurasianist demands for a strategic rupture from the West.

There are more than simply ideological reasons for Türkiye's involvement in the SCO. First, the SCO provides a forum for regional security cooperation by focusing on



counterterrorism, separatism, and extremism, which is in line with Türkiye's worries about the PKK and extremist organisations. Second, important motivators are energy and economic links. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and related SCO projects present Türkiye with new markets and investment opportunities, supporting its goal to integrate into Eurasian infrastructure and energy networks. Third, frustration with the West—stemming from stalled EU accession, tensions with European states, and U.S. disputes over Syria and sanctions—has pushed Ankara to explore alternatives. According to Erdoğan, SCO membership might provide political sovereignty without the EU's democratic and human rights conditions (Dalay, 2013). The SCO was a desirable alternative, particularly after 2016, because of its adaptable rules and emphasis on sovereignty, which matched Türkiye's changing foreign policy objectives.

It is incorrect to see Türkiye's participation in the SCO as a complete rupture with the West. From an institutional balancing perspective, Ankara seeks equilibrium—remaining in the Western alliance while building ties with Russia and China to navigate great-power dynamics. This reflects a "soft balancing" or "multi-vector" strategy (Falk, 2022; Erşen, 2022). While Erdoğan's support for full membership and participation at the 2022 SCO summit demonstrated intent (Falk, 2022), he quickly reiterated NATO's centrality to Turkish strategy, asserting that the SCO and BRICS are not alternatives. Ankara's diplomacy is characterised by this two-pronged strategy, which uses both the East and the West for strategic and financial gain.

NATO partners have expressed worry about Türkiye's geopolitical course because of its growing connections with the SCO. The U.S. sanctions that followed the 2017 acquisition of S-400 missiles were interpreted as evidence of growing Eurasianist influence (Çolakoğlu, 2019). However, Türkiye has avoided entirely distancing itself from NATO and supplied drones to Ukraine and mediated between Moscow and Kyiv during the Ukraine War, even while abstaining from Western sanctions. This reflects Türkiye's strategy of engaging multiple power centres to preserve flexibility. According to the institutional balance theory, nations use this kind of activity to further their interests by preserving their connections across rival blocs (He, 2009: 92). This dual-track strategy is demonstrated by Türkiye's membership in both NATO and the SCO, which allows it to act independently within conflicting geopolitical frameworks.

The interaction between Türkiye and the SCO is a prime example of institutional balance. Ankara uses other forums, including the SCO, to increase strategic adaptability and pursue a multi-vector foreign strategy while preserving its place in the Western alliance. The SCO increases Türkiye's political clout by providing economic cooperation and security without stringent normative requirements. This engagement reflects Ankara's effort to avoid full Western dependence and establish institutional pluralism in Eurasia to operate more autonomously.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study analyses Türkiye's foreign policy from an institutional balancing perspective, evaluating its multi-level institutional engagements with both Western-centred institutions (NATO, EU) and non-Western alternative structures (SCO, OTS) within their strategic context. The findings indicate that Türkiye's foreign policy preferences are



shaped not by a mere change of direction or an axis shift but by a search for strategic autonomy as an emerging power in an environment of increasing competition and uncertainty within the multipolar international system.

At a theoretical level, Türkiye's behaviour aligns with both inclusive and exclusive strategies as defined by Kai He in the institutional balancing model. While relations with NATO and the EU indicate a search for legitimacy, normative harmony and security guarantees, ties developed with regional forums such as the SCO and OTS indicate Türkiye's efforts to create alternative institutional spaces to balance pressures and limitations coming from the West. This situation reveals that Türkiye is not only an actor trying to adapt to the current international order but also an emerging power that desires to reshape regional and global norms.

Türkiye's emerging power position is reinforced not only by its economic capacity but also by its institutional initiative, multi-vector diplomacy and the mediation roles it has developed in times of crisis. While the EU membership process provides Türkiye with long-term strategic advantages through economic arrangements and reform processes, such as the Customs Union, structures like the SCO and the OTS strengthen Türkiye's leadership position in Eurasia and the Turkic world at both symbolic and functional levels. Through this diverse involvement, Türkiye can increase its adaptability and influence within the global power structure.

As a result, Türkiye, an emerging middle power, is creating an institutional balancing plan to safeguard its interests in multilateral institutions and reduce the dominance of superpowers in the shifting global landscape. This approach reflects Ankara's claim to be an actor that not only adapts but also shapes. The Turkish example demonstrates that institutional balancing provides a valid and meaningful strategic model not only for great powers but also for emerging actors with regional influence.

References

- Akçay, E. Y., & Deniz, H. E. (2022). Turkey-European Union (EU) Relations After The July 15 Coup Attempt Within The Framework Of The Random Walk Model. *Manas Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi*. 11(2): 861-869.
- Akgül-Açıkmeşe, S., & Triantaphyllou, D. (2012). The NATO-EU- Turkey Trilogy: The Impact of the Cyprus Conundrum. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*. 12(4): 555-573.
- Aksu, Z. (2022). The Importance of Regional Organizations Established in Eurasia for Turkey: Shanghai Cooperation Organization. *Fırat Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*. 33(2): 939-952. <https://doi.org/10.18069/firatsbed.1215504>
- Armutlu, A. (2023). NATO's Changing Role and Turkey: Security Dynamics and Evolution of Relations. *Middle East Perspectives*. 2(1): 2-51.
- Aslan, A. (2024). Strategic autonomy in Turkish foreign policy: Defence or offence?. *Comparative Strategy*. 43(6): 749-780. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2024.2409049>



Aydın-Düzgit, S. (2016). De-Europeanisation through Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis of AKP's Election Speeches. *South European Society and Politics*. 21(1): 45-58.

Bardakçı, M. (2021). Is a Strategic Partnership Between Turkey and Russia Feasible at the Expense of Turkey's Relations with the EU and NATO?. *Comparative Southeast European Studies*. 69(4): 535-559. <https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2021-0001>

Çolakoğlu, S. (2019, April 16). The Rise of Eurasianism in Turkish Foreign Policy: Can Turkey Change Its Pro-Western Orientation?. *Middle East Institute*.

Daily Sabah. (2013). Erdoğan: If we could enter Shanghai Five, we would say goodbye to the EU, <https://www.dailysabah.com/Türkiye/2013/01/26/erdogan-if-we-could-enter-shanghai-five-we-would-say-goodbye-to-eu>

David, S. R. (1991). Explaining Third World Alignment. *World Politics*, 43(2): 233-256.

Demir, C. (2022). The Organisation of Turkic States: Implications for the Regional Balance of Power. *Güvenlik Stratejileri Dergisi, Special Issue on the OTS*. 18: 39-71. <https://doi.org/10.17752/guvenlikstrjtj.1104776>

Erşen, E. (2022). Turkey and the Eurasian Integration: Ideology or Pragmatism? *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*. 22(1): 111-125.

European Commission. (2024). Global Gateway: EU and Central Asian countries agree on building blocks to develop the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, January 30, 2024, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/global-gateway-eu-and-central-asian-countries-agree-building-blocks-develop-trans-caspian-transport-2024-01-30_en

European Parliament. (2019). <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190307IPR30746/parliament-wants-to-suspend-eu-accession-negotiations-with-Türkiye>

Falk, T. O. (2022, 28 Eylül). Turkey's SCO ambitions: A complex East-West balancing act. *The New Arab*.

Güpgüpoğlu, E. R. (2019). Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Turkey Relations. *Resolusi: Jurnal Sosial Politik*. 2(1): 45-54. <https://doi.org/10.32699/resolusi.v2i1.723>

Hale, W., & Avci, G. (2001). Turkey and the European Union: The Long Road to Membership. In B. Rubin & K. Kirisci (eds), *Turkey in World Politics: An Emerging Regional Power*. Lynne Rienner, 93-114.

He, K. & Feng, H. (2020). International Institutions, Institutional Balancing, and Peaceful Order Transition. *Ethics & International Affairs*. 34(4): 487-501. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679420000581>

He, K. (2008). Institutional balancing and international relations theory: Economic interdependence and balance of power strategies in Southeast Asia. *European Journal of International Relations*. 14(3): 489-518. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066108092310>

He, K. (2009). *Institutional Balancing in the Asia Pacific: Economic interdependence and China's rise*. London: Routledge.



- He, K. (2022). China's rise, institutional balancing, and (possible) peaceful order transition in the Asia-Pacific. *The Pacific Review*. 35(6): 1105-1134, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2075439>
- Held, D., McGrew, A., Goldblatt, D., & Perraton, J. (2004). *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hettne, B. & Söderbaum, F. (2006). The UN and Regional Organisations in Global Security: Competing or Complementary Logics? *Global Governance*. 12(3): 227-232.
- Hurrell, A. (1995). Explaining the Resurgence of Regionalism in World Politics. *Review of International Studies*. 21(4): 331-358.
- Kibaroğlu, M. (2019). On Turkey's Missile Defence Strategy: The Four Faces of the S-400 Deal between Turkey and Russia. *Perceptions*. 24(2-3): 159-174.
- Kinacioğlu, M. (2017). NATO- Turkey Relations: From Collective Defence to Collective Security. P. Gözen-Ercan (ed). *Turkish Foreign Policy International Relations, Legality and Global Reach*. Palgrave Macmillan, 83-103.
- Krzyżanowska, Z. (2024, May 17). On the trail of the grey wolf: pan-Turkism in Turkey's foreign policy. *Centre for Eastern Studies*. OSW Commentary No. 595.
- Matveev, A. (2025, April 16). Turkey's Turkic Gambit: Balancing Influence in Post-Soviet States's Turkic Gambit: Balancing Influence in Post-Soviet States. *The Times of Central Asia*.
- McGhee, G. C. (1990). *The US-Turkey-NATO Middle East Connection: How the Truman Doctrine and Turkey's NATO Entry Contained the Soviets*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Müftüler-Baç, M. (2017). Turkey's future with the European Union: An alternative model of differentiated integration. *Turkish Studies*. 18(3): 416-438.
- Oğuzlu, T. (2013). Turkey and NATO. *ADAM Akademi*: 3(1): 1-10.
- Öniş, Z. (2003). Domestic Politics, International Norms and Challenges to the State: Turkey-EU Relations in the post-Helsinki Era. A. Çarkoğlu & B. Rubin (ed). *Turkey and the European Union: Domestic Politics, Economic Integration and International Dynamics*. London: Routledge, 9-34.
- Öniş, Z., & Yılmaz, Ş. (2009). Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era. *Turkish Studies*. 10(1): 7-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683840802648562>
- Pape, R. A. (2005). Soft Balancing against the United States. *International Security*. 30(1): 7-45.
- Paul, T. V. (2005). Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy. *International Security*. 30(1): 46-71.
- Peters, M. A. (2023). The emerging multipolar world order: A preliminary analysis. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*. 55(14): 1653-1663. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2022.2151896>
- Purtaş, F. (2025). Türkiye and the Organisation of Turkic States: A Strategic Partnership for Regional Integration. *Insight Turkey*. 27(1): 113-132.



Reuters. (2016). Fed up with the EU, Erdogan says Turkey could join the Shanghai bloc. November 20, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/fed-up-with-eu-erdogan-says-Türkiye-could-join-shanghai-bloc-idUSKBN13F0D1/>

Roy, I. (2022). Southern Multilateralism: Complementary Competition Vis-à-Vis the Liberal International Order. *Global Perspectives*. 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.1525/gp.2022.39589>

Stephen, M. D. (2017). Emerging Powers and Emerging Trends in Global Governance. *Global Governance*. 23(3): 483-502. <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02303009>

Tetik, M. O. (2021). Discursive reconstruction of civilisational-self: Turkish national identity and the European Union (2002–2017). *European Politics and Society*. 22(3): 374-393.

Ünlühisarcıklı, Ö. (2019). Turkey's Questionable Commitment to NATO. *The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) Policy Brief*.

Ünver Noi, A. (2025). Türkiye-EU Relations: Revisited from Europeanization and CFSP Alignment Perspective. *Insight Turkey*. 27(1): 133-152.

Voeten, E. (2017). Competition and Complementarity between Global and Regional Human Rights Institutions. *Global Policy*. 8(1): 119-123. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12395>

Waldman, S. & Çalışkan, E. (2017). *The New Turkey and Its Discontents: Structural Challenges and Strategic Choices*. London: Chatham House Publications.

Walt, S. M. (1985). *Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power*. *International Security*. 9(4): 3-43.

Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. Addison-Wesley.

Zürcher, E. J. (2005). *Turkey: A Modern History*.

FROM WEST TO THE REST: ANALYSING TURKEY'S BRICS MEMBERSHIP BID THROUGH THE PRISM OF WESTERNISM

SEVEN ERDOĞAN

seven.erdogan@erdogan.edu.tr

Associate Professor at the Department of International Relations, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences (Turkey). Orcid: 0000-0001-9991-2074

BURÇİN BEDEL

burcin.bedel@erdogan.edu.tr

Assistant Professor at the Department of International Relations, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences (Turkey). Orcid: 0000-0002-7820-3348

Abstract

This article examines the evolution of Turkey's foreign policy through the lens of its bid for BRICS membership, contextualised within the country's shifting approach to Westernism. The study thus contributes to ongoing discussions about the shifting alignments of emerging powers in a multipolar world. Drawing on historical process tracing, the study argues that Turkey's frustrations with Western institutions have prompted a strategic recalibration toward alternative multilateral frameworks. However, the analysis reveals that Turkey's overtures to BRICS represent not a wholesale rejection of the West, but an attempt to balance East-West allegiances in a multipolar world. The findings suggest that while BRICS appeals to Ankara's rhetoric of autonomy and multipolarity, its suitability as a strategic alternative remains limited.

Keywords

Turkey, Westernism, BRICS, Turkish Foreign Policy, Turkey-West Relations.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a evolução da política externa da Turquia através da lente da sua candidatura à adesão aos BRICS, contextualizada dentro da mudança de abordagem do país em relação ao ocidentalismo. O estudo contribui, assim, para as discussões em curso sobre as mudanças nas alianças das potências emergentes num mundo multipolar. Com base no rastreamento do processo histórico, o estudo argumenta que as frustrações da Turquia com as instituições ocidentais levaram a uma recalibração estratégica em direção a estruturas multilaterais alternativas. No entanto, a análise revela que as aproximações da Turquia aos BRICS não representam uma rejeição total do Ocidente, mas uma tentativa de equilibrar as alianças entre o Oriente e o Ocidente num mundo multipolar. As conclusões sugerem que, embora os BRICS apele à retórica de autonomia e multipolaridade de Ancara, a sua adequação como alternativa estratégica continua a ser limitada.



Palavras-chave

Turquia, ocidentalismo, BRICS, política externa turca, relações Turquia-Occidente.

How to cite this article

Erdoğan, Seven & Bedel, Burçin (2025). From West to the Rest: Analysing Turkey's Brics Membership Bid Through the Prism of Westernism. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 187-204. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.10>

Article submitted on 29th May 2025 and accepted for publication on 29th September 2025.





FROM WEST TO THE REST: ANALYSING TURKEY'S BRICS MEMBERSHIP BID THROUGH THE PRISM OF WESTERNISM

SEVEN ERDOĞAN

BURÇİN BEDEL

Introduction

Over the past decade, the rise of emerging economies has reshaped the global political landscape, particularly through the emergence of new international actors, such as the BRICS (Christensen & Xing, 2016; Lissovolik & Vinokurov, 2019). This shift has even been interpreted as the beginning of a post-Western world order that has expanded the space for regional and middle powers to act autonomously (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021). In parallel with these global dynamics, Turkey has exhibited traits that align with this shift and has become more open to new and alternative foreign policy visions, bringing about new partnerships and ad hoc alliances with non-Western actors. By adopting an almost identical line to the BRICS countries with its weakening Westernism in foreign policy, Turkey has promoted the idea of a multipolar international order and defended the rights of the least developed countries. Turkey's interest in joining BRICS gained prominence as its emerging political orientation began to align with the rising global profile and normative stance of the BRICS countries. The convergence between Turkey's shifting foreign policy priorities and the growing influence of this like-minded coalition brought renewed attention to the prospect of deeper engagement with BRICS as an alternative platform for international cooperation.

This study examines Turkey's pursuit of BRICS membership within the broader context of its evolving orientation toward the West in foreign policy. Over the past two decades, Turkey's traditional Westernist stance, characterised by an almost unquestioned alignment with the West, has visibly shifted, giving way to growing scepticism toward Western institutions and a search for alternative alignments, driven by a more selective, pragmatic, and autonomy-oriented approach. By situating the BRICS bid within this shift, the study seeks to uncover how changing perceptions of the West have influenced Turkey's strategic interest in engaging with non-Western platforms. The study addresses the issue through two main research questions: first, how Turkey's evolving approach to Westernism has influenced its pivot toward non-Western platforms such as BRICS; and second, to what extent Turkey's interest in BRICS represents a rational strategy for balancing its diminishing alignment with the West through alternative global partnerships. By examining these questions, the article aims to contribute to broader debates on multipolarity, middle power diplomacy, and the strategic recalibration of



foreign policy in a shifting international order. The primary methodology of this research is historical process tracing, aimed at uncovering two interconnected processes occurring concurrently.

The paper is organised as follows: The first section offers a historical overview of Westernism in Turkish foreign policy. The second section explores the evolving dynamics of Turkey's relationship with the West over the past two decades, with particular emphasis on the crises that have shaped this trajectory. The final section examines Turkey's pursuit of BRICS membership in the context of its shifting stance on Westernism.

Tracing Traditional Westernism in Turkish Foreign Policy

With its deeply embedded roots in the early Ottoman reform era of the 19th century, aiming to modernise political, economic, and social structures by initially taking the rapidly advancing West, solely Europe, as a role model, Westernism has consistently served as a foundational element of Turkish foreign policy. With the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the ideal of Westernisation was further consolidated in the hands of new ruling cadres who envisioned a modern and secular state that would achieve Western levels of political and economic development by eradicating all traces of the Ottoman legacy. After warring against some members of the West during the First World War and waging a war of salvation against them, taking the West as a model, they renamed it the attainment of a higher level of civilisation (Monceau, 2023). Over time, this orientation evolved into a clear and consistent foreign policy stance, with Turkey pursuing strong ties with the Western powers. However, the official approach to foreign policy during the interwar period was characterised by neutrality, aiming to develop friendly relations with both Western powers and the Soviet Union (SU) (Criss, 2017).

After the Second World War, Turkey, faced with the growing Soviet threat, sought security guarantees from the West, especially from the US (Oğuzlu, 2003). This motivated Turkey's membership in all post-war Western constructs, and Westernism emerged as a stable tenet of Turkish foreign policy despite the changing ideological orientation of the ruling parties (Ovalı & Özdikmenli, 2020). The signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949 and Turkey's subsequent membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1952 marked a clear political commitment to the Western bloc, as the country strengthened its position in the face of the growing ideological and military Cold War rivalry between the US and the SU. Turkey's acquisition of a place within the Western security architecture became a fundamental shift from Turkey's earlier policy of neutrality to a more overtly Western-oriented foreign policy approach (Oğuzlu, 2019). This change, mainly due to Turkey's geopolitical position as a buffer between the Western powers and the SU was very much welcomed by the West (Müftüler-Baç, 1996). In return for its loyalty, Turkey received economic and military aid from the West during this period, which eventually led to a high degree of integration of the Turkish military into NATO structures (Lippe, 2000). With a few exceptions, such as the Cyprus crisis (from the early 1960s) or the opium crisis (late 1960s), Turkish foreign policy remained very compatible with the West throughout the Cold War (Aydın, 2000). However, the memory



of the past problems with the West has persisted because of the "Sèvres Syndrome"¹, which has been passed on to new generations (Şahin, 2025). Beyond the security perspective, the westernisation of Turkish foreign policy intensified when the country decided to develop closer ties with the European Economic Community by the late 1950s, the predecessor of the European Union (EU), primarily to achieve its economic modernisation (Bilgin & Bilgiç, 2012).

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the SU created a new geopolitical context in which Turkey's relationship with the West faced significant challenges. Turkey continued to value its relationship with the West. However, its place within the Western alliance began to be questioned due to the changing geopolitical dynamics, lessening the country's strategic value. The rise of identity politics, which makes Turkey different and less democratic, is a significant problem for the West (Şahin, 2020). During the 1990s, the relative importance of Europe in Turkey's Western foreign policy line increased with the country's formal application for EU membership in 1987, in fulfilment of its aspirations for European integration (Erdoğan, 2019). This new positioning of Turkey also received the support of the US (Tocci, 2012). Following the declaration of Turkey as a candidate for membership in 1999, the EU accession process became the main rationale for Turkey's continued commitment to Western political and economic norms in the post-Cold War era (Müftüler-Bağ, 2005).

This foreign policy line, primarily designed by the secular state elite, continued uninterrupted after the rise of political Islam to power in 2003, when the country's new ruling cadres opted for a foreign policy based on pragmatism and economic liberalisation (Dinçşahin, 2012). These were the golden years in Turkey-EU relations. Turkey's Western credentials were further strengthened as the country materialised an extensive list of reforms to be eligible for the next round of EU enlargement (Kaliber, 2014). During this period, as a Muslim country that embraced liberal democratic values, Turkey was portrayed by the West as a role model (Çınar, 2018). However, this positive atmosphere became short-lived when the EU formally decided not to conclude accession talks with Turkey until the Cyprus problem had been resolved in 2006, following Turkey's refusal to apply the customs union to the Greek side of Cyprus (Heinz, 2007).

Not only relations with the EU, but also with the US became more strained during this period, especially after the US decision to intervene in Iraq for the second time in 2003. At a time when the Turkish government was divided between being a reliable ally and avoiding the security implications of an imminent war, the Turkish National Assembly voted against the use of Turkish territory by American forces to reach Iraq from the north (Yeşiltas, 2009). In this case, Turkey's position clashed with the American one. However, it was not totally anti-Western, because Europe was also divided on this issue. The leading countries of Europe, also known as old Europe, led by Germany and France, also adopted a position against this intervention (Crowe, 2003). However, Turkey's decision was a big disappointment for the US. In the shadow of these frustrations in relations with

¹ A traumatic syndrome based on the sense of failure and loss caused by the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which was imposed on the Ottoman Empire by the victorious allies after its defeat in the First World War and which aimed to divide the Ottoman territory between the major Western powers and the local groups supporting them. The Sèvres Treaty was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, following the Turkish War of Independence victory.



the West, dissatisfaction with the dominance of Westernism in Turkish foreign policy began to grow, culminating in a process of distancing Turkey from the West in foreign policy.

A New Era of Westernism in Turkish Foreign Policy in the Wake of Recent Crises

In the past, temporary crises, such as the opium crisis in the 1960s, have been observed in the relations between Turkey and the West. These past crises made Turkey see the limits of its alliance with the West, but they never led it to rethink its relations with the West radically. In the last two decades, however, a combination of shifting internal (i.e., the rise of conservative ruling elites or Turkey's strong economic performance when the West was suffering from the 2008 crisis) and external (i.e., developments in the neighbourhood or increasing multipolarity of the international system) dynamics has led to a new set of crises that have allowed a profound questioning of the traditional Western orientation of Turkish foreign policy by challenging the long-accepted idea of seeking Western approval or guidance for every significant foreign policy action (Akkoyunlu, 2021). This new foreign policy line has been identified in the literature under various banners, such as neo-Ottomanism (Trifković, 2011), Islamic realism (Yalvaç, 2016) and Euro-Asianism (Erşen, 2019), zero problems with neighbours (Cornell, 2012), and has resulted in discussions about the country's strategic autonomy (Oğuzlu, 2020), shifting axis (Başer, 2015), paradigm shift (Sözen, 2010), twists and turns (Cop & Zihnioğlu, 2017), precious loneliness (Coşkun, 2015), de-Europeanization (Yılmaz, 2016) and independence (Taşpınar, 2011) in foreign policy.

Anti-Westernism in Turkey has become prominent as the government follows more nationalist and security-oriented policies, after consolidating its power by the 2010s (Karaömeroğlu, 2022). In such a context, ruling cadres relied more on populist discourses, including anti-Western elements, such as the West's siding with Turkey's enemies or its double standards towards Turkey (Hazır, 2022). "One Minute Crisis" during the 2009 World Economic Forum meeting, which ended Turkey's balanced policy on the Israeli-Palestine conflict and opened the way for its active engagement on the side of the Palestinians (Cornell, 2012), was a historic moment that gave the first signals of the reconfiguration of the West in Turkish foreign policy, as it also included a rejection of the West's unconditional support for Israel. In addition, Turkey, which is heavily dependent on Iran for energy, showed its dissatisfaction with the sanctions against Iran by voting against the fourth round of sanctions against Iran on 9 June 2010 during its temporary membership of the United Nations Security Council, and this new policy line was viewed as very alarming by the US (Ari, 2022).

Turkey's quest for strategic autonomy gained significant momentum since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 (Öniş & Uluyol, 2025), and it became so evident with the Arab Spring, especially during the Syrian crisis, that the gap between Turkish and Western foreign policies widened due to the differing approaches to regional stability (Aydın-Düzgüt, Kutlay & Keyman, 2025). While Turkey generally sided with the opposition forces, the West stood for stability and did not favour the processes bringing actors associated



with political Islam to power (Aliboni, 2011). The diverging positioning of Turkey and the West gained a new dimension, when the West, notably the US, decided to provide political and military support to the Kurds in Syria, who are seen by Turkey as a Syrian branch of the internationally recognized terrorist organisation of PKK targeting Turkish state since the 1980s, as a ground force in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) by 2014 (Outzen, 2025). This new US positioning was totally clashing with the previous one, including active or passive support of Turkish actions against the PKK, by sharing the country's security concerns. These changing security concerns of the parties resulted in the opposition of the West to Turkey's military operations in northern Syria, aiming to create safe zones in areas near the border (Atmaca & Torun, 2022). Turkey's operations in northern Syria have been heavily condemned by the West and framed as a process hampering the fight against ISIS (Orton, 2016). When Turkey chooses to act independently at the regional level, it undermines the effectiveness of Western collective efforts aimed at promoting regional stability. Besides, this new positioning also raised doubts about Turkey's long-standing commitments as a NATO member and EU membership candidate, especially when coupled with its growing de-alignment from EU norms, particularly in the areas of democratic governance, the rule of law, and foreign policy. (Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2014).

The Gezi Park Protests in 2013 and the failed coup attempt in 2016, culminated on top of each other, resulting in a still ongoing trauma on the ruling cadres of Turkey. These two events led to an increase in their tendency to use a securitisation perspective in the making of foreign policy (Karakoç & Ersoy, 2024). From Turkey's point of view, the West's exclusive expression of its concern about the erosion of democracy and rule of law was a failure to understand the country's renewed sense of security (Özpek & Tanrıverdi-Yaşar, 2017). The country's disappointment with the West grew when the Russian government, despite the ongoing influence of the crisis stemming from the downing of a Russian jet by Turkey, sided strongly with the Turkish government (Oğuzlu, 2020). When the coup plotters, who were clearly terrorists from the point of view of the Turkish government, went to Western countries as safe havens, it is worth noting that the US was hosting the leading cadres of the Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organisation (FETO); the matter was further complicated. This was seen as an unfriendly interference in the internal affairs of the country and listed as support for terrorist organisations targeting Turkey (Kaliber & Kaliber, 2019). The tension with the US reached a peak when Turkey imprisoned US Pastor Brunson due to his so-called ties with the groups targeting the government of Turkey. During this crisis, President Trump even sent a very unfriendly letter to his counterpart and threatened Turkey with severe political and economic sanctions. To show its sincerity about the economic pressure, in August 2018, the US took some steps to show its ability to destabilise Turkey's capital markets, and finally, the pastor was freed after two years of detention (Strachota & Wilk, 2019).

Turkey's changing perception of the West shapes not only its relations with the West but also with the non-Western actors. When Turkey has had problems in its relations with the West, it has tended to develop its economic and political ties, especially with the West's competitors, such as Russia and Iran (Ovalı & Özdikmenli, 2020). Turkey has long suffered from being unable to meet its military equipment needs from its leading suppliers in the West, especially the US. The US refusal to sell the Patriot missile defence



system led the country to buy the Russian S-400 defence system. Turkey's decision, an explicit demonstration of its strategic autonomy, led to a further deterioration in relations with the West by generating friction with key allies. As a reaction to the S-400 purchase, the West adopted a punitive attitude, and Turkey's membership in the F-35 programme, which aims to develop a new-generation fighter jet, was cancelled, and sanctions were imposed on Turkey's Defence Procurement Agency under the CAATSA mechanism (Martin, 2025). The country has even negotiated the sale of new F-16 fighter jets and the modernisation of existing ones, linking them to its approval of Finland's and Sweden's NATO membership (Neset, 2023). Not only has the country been meeting its needs from non-Western actors, but it has also been improving its self-sufficiency in this area through heavy investment in its national defence industry because of being denied access to Western weapons (Bağcı & Kurç, 2017). This process overall paved the way for a new wave of anti-Western discourse in Turkish foreign policy (Hazır, 2022). As an offshoot of this new dynamic, Turkey did not join the Western sanctions imposed on Russia after the Ukraine crisis, but only the UN sanctions and maintained its economic, trade and energy relations with Russia (Yanık, 2023).

Despite these challenges in the relations with the West, Turkey has continued to prioritise its North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) membership, highlighting the importance of its security ties to the West (Ciddi, 2022). Turkey's role in regional security, its strategic location between Europe and the Middle East, and its position as a key member of NATO ensure that it remains an important factor in Western foreign policy discussions (Oğuzlu, 2020). As well as its membership of NATO, the country has also valued its customs union with the EU, which has been in force since 1996. Putting aside the dynamics of mutual resentment stemming from the problems of the accession aspect of the relationship, Turkey and the EU, as two sides sharing the same neighbourhood and facing similar challenges, have chosen to create a new balance in the relationship through a kind of issue-based functional cooperation in areas of mutual interest, such as migration, energy or climate change (Erdoğan, 2024). Despite Turkey's willingness to cooperate, a widely held perception persists in Europe that Turkey has deprioritised its EU accession in favour of pursuing strategic pluralism, particularly in the realm of foreign policy. As a result, Turkey's reliability as a partner has been increasingly questioned, and the tendency to view Turkey as a third country rather than a candidate country has grown stronger (Turhan, 2025).

Turkey's Claims for BRICS Membership

Turkey's interest in joining BRICS can be traced back to 2018, when the country was invited to the 10th annual summit of the initiative in Johannesburg, as the head of the rotating presidency of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. President Erdoğan attended the meeting and interpreted the invitation as a significant opportunity for Turkey's potential inclusion in the group. In his address during this meeting, Erdoğan emphasised the prospective trajectory of cooperation between Turkey and BRICS members and even referred to Turkey's membership by using the term BRICST (Daily Sabah, 2018). Consequently, following this initial high-level engagement, discussions surrounding Turkey's aspiration to join BRICS gained greater momentum.



Beyond its general desire to develop relations with key countries of the Global South, Turkey's interest in BRICS, one of the key players in the non-Western camp, is driven by a combination of economic, strategic, and ideological considerations. Among these, economic motivations, particularly the vast market potential of BRICS member states, play a pivotal role in informing Turkey's engagement with the group, especially in the context of ongoing economic challenges such as high inflation and the depreciation of the Turkish lira (OECD, 2023). Illustrating this perspective, on November 14, 2024, Reuters reported statements by President Erdoğan, noting that "Ankara sees the BRICS group as an opportunity to further economic cooperation with member states, rather than as an alternative to its Western ties and NATO membership" (Reuters, 2024a). However, the weakness of BRICS as a well-developed financial framework and trade network (Helleiner & Wang, 2018) makes Turkey's economic expectations somewhat speculative compared to its resilient economic ties with the West. From a strategic and political perspective, as previously noted in this study, Turkey has become increasingly disillusioned with its Western partners. The prolonged stagnation of its EU accession process and persistent tensions with NATO allies have contributed to Ankara's growing aspiration to operate as an independent global actor engaging with others. Ideologically, the BRICS' emphasis on sovereignty, non-interference, and multipolarity resonates with Turkey's own rhetorical stance in international affairs, which calls for a more just world order and its broader ambition to advocate for comprehensive system reform. Turkey is no longer content with an ideological commitment that equates Westernisation with modernisation and democratisation. This does not mean, however, that it rejects the liberal international order entirely; instead, Turkey aims to engage with it on its own terms, especially with a foreign policy vision that prioritises flexibility, diversification, and regional actorness.

President Erdoğan and other Turkish officials have made several public statements indicating Turkey's interest in BRICS, including their expectation of an invitation. On numerous occasions, this interest has been articulated in parallel with frustrations over the stagnation of the country's EU accession process. As such, discussions surrounding BRICS membership within the Turkish context have often served as a vehicle for expressing disillusionment with the trajectory of EU-Turkey relations (DW, 2024). This suggests that within the mindset of Turkey's ruling elites, there is a prevailing tendency to view BRICS and the EU as alternative, and at times competing frameworks for international engagement. In terms of population and economic capacity, BRICS holds significant potential. However, from a political point of view, its record on democracy and human rights remains unpromising (Bacık, 2013). Turkey's still enduring dream of modernisation in the form of democratisation, which is very much in line with the ideal of EU membership, does not fit comfortably into the BRICS framework. Moreover, the growing geopolitical tensions between key actors of the West and the BRICS bloc risk complicating Turkey's efforts to maintain a calibrated balance in its foreign policy. As Ankara seeks to diversify its strategic and economic partnerships beyond traditional Western alliances, these rivalries may limit its room for manoeuvre, forcing difficult choices between competing power centres and potentially undermining its pursuit of strategic autonomy. Hence, Ankara needs to find an innovative way to leverage new alliances without jeopardising the benefits of its existing partnerships.



BRICS has issued several declarations referring to its expansion into various world regions, such as Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East, making its intention to include countries from these areas as members (BRICS, 2024). However, despite strengthened bilateral relations with individual BRICS members, Turkey was not explicitly mentioned as a potential member in any of these declarations. In 2024, Turkey's membership in the BRICS turned into a heated debate after Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates were accepted as BRICS members. Even the earlier membership of South Africa, which is comparable to Turkey in terms of economic size and relative proximity to the West, was a strong signal for Turkey (Lissovolik & Vinokurov, 2019). During his official visit to China in June 2024, Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Hakan Fidan was asked whether Turkey would be interested in joining BRICS. In response, he briefly stated, "We would like to, of course, why wouldn't we?", thereby refraining from providing a detailed explanation of the country's official stance (Reuters, 2024b). Minister Fidan gave another briefing the same month and made Turkey's position on BRICS more precise: "When we look at the BRICS issue, we have to follow very closely how alternative economic platforms are being formed in the world and how markets are being formed... All these alternative platforms, in fact, we should see them as complementary rather than alternative to each other, and we are making serious efforts to evaluate these platforms in favour of our country" (Demir, 2024).

In the absence of a formal statement, media reports in September 2024 suggested that Turkey had been invited to join the BRICS, a reflection of its efforts to increase its global influence and forge new partnerships beyond traditional Western allies (Hacaoğlu & Kozok, 2024). The media also reported that Turkey made an official application for membership at the annual BRICS summit in Russia on 22-24 October 2024 (Waldman, 2024). This act is very much in line with President Erdoğan's official statement in early September that "Turkey can become a strong, prosperous, respected and effective country if it improves its relations with the East and the West at the same time" (Hacaoğlu & Kozok, 2024). Turkey thus became the first NATO country to apply for BRICS membership.

The absence of well-defined membership criteria compels the BRICS to evaluate each membership application on a case-by-case basis (Lissovolik & Vinokurov, 2019). The reaction of the existing BRICS members to Turkey's membership has been cautiously receptive. However, there is clearly a lack of unanimity. Turkey's geographic position as a Eurasian bridge and its NATO membership could lend BRICS additional geopolitical weight, particularly regarding Euro-Atlantic institutions. China and Russia, key proponents of BRICS enlargement, may view Turkey's accession as a strategic gain. President Putin also expressed his satisfaction with Turkey's aspiration to align more closely with BRICS, emphasising its desire for cooperation in addressing common challenges and reaffirmed his support for Turkey's bid for membership (PBS News, 2024). In contrast to Russia, China maintained a somewhat ambiguous stance on this issue, mainly due to the persistent tensions arising from the divergent sensitivities of both countries regarding the Uyghur issue (Akin, 2024). In addition, reports have suggested that India holds a negative stance toward Turkey's potential BRICS membership, primarily due to Turkey's close ties with Pakistan and its support for Pakistan in the Kashmir conflict (Bellut, 2024). India has not issued any formal statements or produced



any official discourse regarding Turkey's potential membership in BRICS. However, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has offered insights into India's general position on the admission of new members, stating: "India is ready to welcome new countries as BRICS partner countries. All decisions in this regard should be made unanimously, and the views of the founding members of BRICS should be respected" (Times of India, 2024). Meanwhile, South Africa and Brazil are likely to evaluate Turkey's bid based on its contributions to global South agendas and development cooperation, wary of diluting BRICS' cohesion through overly rapid expansion (Stuenkel, 2015).

In response to reports suggesting that India is blocking Turkey's accession to BRICS, Turkish officials have come up with denials. The Turkish Minister of Trade Ömer Bolat emphasized that "there is no question of India vetoing our membership" (Associated Press, 2024), while former diplomat Sinan Ülgen noted that "there was 'no need to veto' Turkey's membership, as the issue was not voted upon at the recent BRICS meet in Kazan, Russia" (Varma, 2024).

Western governments have responded to Turkey's BRICS overtures with a mixture of concern and pragmatic recognition. Turkey's potential BRICS membership is particularly sensitive given its NATO status, raising fears of divided loyalties within the alliance (Kirişci, 2020). Turkish officials have repeatedly said potential membership of BRICS would not affect Turkey's responsibilities to the Western military alliance (Reuters, 2024a). At the same time, some Western analysts interpret Turkey's manoeuvre as a strategic play rather than a definitive shift in allegiance (Öniş & Uluyol, 2025). Ankara has a history of transactional diplomacy, leveraging its geostrategic location and political relevance to extract concessions from both East and West (Gökay, 2024). In this sense, Turkey's BRICS bid could be seen as a bargaining chip aimed at gaining greater recognition and autonomy within existing Western-led institutions. This is understandable, as Turkey is unlikely to leave its long-established position in Western institutions.

According to Channel News Asia's coverage, Turkey's partner country status was approved at the last BRICS meeting. The country listed among the 13 nations will be waiting to join (Norman, 2024). By taking such a decision, the BRICS gained some time to observe whether Turkey's rapprochement is a periodic change or not, as Turkey is still institutionally, politically, economically and militarily cooperating with the West (Ari, 2022). But the partnership status seems to be falling short of Turkey's expectation of attaining full membership in BRICS, an outcome that would offer the country an opportunity to maintain a more balanced relationship between the West and the East (Reuters, 2024a). If this is indeed the case, there is the potential for Turkey to experience a kind of disillusionment in its engagement with BRICS. Therefore, the issue has not received much media coverage in Turkey, unless the top leadership mentions it.

Conclusion

This study has examined the recent transformation of Turkish foreign policy amid shifting global and domestic dynamics, including the decline of unipolarity, the rise of new powers, the enduring impact of the failed July 15 coup attempt, and the rise of populism.



Within this framework, Turkey's evolving approach to Westernism has been critically analysed in relation to its bid for BRICS membership.

Historically anchored in a pro-Western orientation, Turkey's foreign policy over the past two decades has increasingly diverged due to growing frustration with the West and a sense of marginalisation within the Western bloc. This has led to oscillations between Westernism and anti-Westernism, culminating in a more pragmatic and self-reliant form of Westernism. This new orientation seeks to balance traditional Western alliances with alternative partnerships, such as those offered by BRICS, reflecting a strategic recalibration rather than outright rejection.

Turkey's pivot toward non-Western platforms like BRICS is thus closely tied to its evolving stance on Westernism. BRICS represents not only an economic opportunity but also a geopolitical counterbalance to the West, with its emphasis on sovereignty, non-interference, and multipolarity resonating with Turkey's current foreign policy discourse. Turkey's renewed expressions of interest in BRICS, particularly during periods of heightened tension with Western powers, underscore a calculated effort to diversify its foreign policy options and enhance its autonomy.

In this light, Turkey's engagement with BRICS is best understood as a rational strategy aimed at balancing its diminishing alignment with Western institutions by cultivating alternative global partnerships. Rather than signalling a definitive break from the West, this strategy reflects Ankara's desire to maximise its leverage in an increasingly multipolar international order by pivoting between established and emerging power blocs, through a more flexible engagement allowing it to safeguard its national interest.

Moving forward, Turkey's evolving relationship with both Western institutions and emerging platforms like BRICS will be a key indicator of its broader international ambitions and strategic positioning. The interactions and reactions between BRICS members and Turkey's traditional Western allies highlight the complexities involved in navigating divergent institutional loyalties and geopolitical commitments. As BRICS broadens its influence and inclusiveness, Turkey's possible membership could signal a pivotal shift in global governance and a transformation of traditional alliances in the twenty-first century.

References

- Akın, E. (2024, June 4). In China, Turkey's Fidan says he plans to attend the BRICS meeting in Russia. In *Al-monitor* [online]. [Consulted on April 13, 2025] <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/06/china-turkeys-fidan-says-he-plans-attend-brics-meeting-russia?utm>
- Akkoyunlu, K. (2021). 'The five phases of Turkey's foreign policy under the AKP.' *Social research: an international quarterly*. 88(2), 243-270. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2021.0014>
- Aliboni, R. (2011). 'The international dimension of the Arab spring.' *The international spectator*. 46(4), 5-9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2011.637712>



Ari, T. (2022). "Orientation of Turkish foreign policy: Disengagement from or re-engagement to the West." In T. Ari (Ed.), *Inter-state and intra-state conflicts in global politics: From Eurasia to China*. Rowman and Littlefield/Lexington: New York, (p. 3-16)

Associated Press. (2024, November 2024). Turkey's trade minister says the country expects to be offered partner status in the BRICS bloc. [Consulted on April 11, 2025] <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-brics-member-russia-cc8c286853c0af2ebc6379954357cd3e>

Atmaca, A. Ö. & Torun Z. (2022). 'Geopolitical visions in Turkish foreign policy.' *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*. 24(1), 114-137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2021.1992189>

Aydın, M. (2000). 'Determinants of Turkish foreign policy: Changing patterns and conjunctures during the Cold War.' *Middle Eastern studies*. 36(1), 103-39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200008701300>

Aydın-Düzgit, S. & Keyman E. F. (2014). 'EU-Turkey relations and the stagnation of Turkish democracy'. *Global Turkey in Europe working paper*, 2. In Sabanci University Research Database [online]. [Consulted on August 7, 2025] <https://research.sabanciuniv.edu/id/eprint/23576/>

Aydın-Düzgit, S., Kutlay M., Keyman E. F. (2025). 'Strategic autonomy in Turkish foreign policy in an age of multipolarity: Lineages and contradictions of an idea.' *International politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00638-w>

Bacık, G. (2013). 'Turkey and the BRICS: Can Turkey join the BRICS?' *Turkish studies*. 14(4), 758-773. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2013.861109>

Bağcı, H. & Kurç Ç. (2017). 'Turkey's strategic choice: buy or make weapons?' *Defence studies*. 17(1), 38-62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2016.1262742>

Başer, E. T. (2015). 'Shift-of-axis in Turkish foreign policy: Turkish national role conceptions before and during AKP rule.' *Turkish studies*. 16(3), 291-309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2015.1050958>

Bellut, D. (2024, October 24). Keine Aufnahme in Putin-Allianz: Erdogans BRICS-Traum zerplatzt. In *Bild* (online). [Consulted on April 13, 2025] <https://www.bild.de/politik/ausland-und-internationales/erdogans-brics-traum-zerplatzt-keine-aufnahme-in-putin-allianz-6718b1b5defbfe64e2c3cdaa>

Bilgin, P. & Bilgiç A. (2012). 'Turkey and EU/rope: Discourses of inspiration/anxiety in Turkey's foreign policy.' *Review of European studies*. 4(3), 111-124. <https://doi.org/10.5539/res.v4n3p111>

BRICS. (2024, October 2023). XVI BRICS Summit Kazan declaration strengthening multilateralism for just global development and security. [Consulted on April 9, 2025] <https://brics.br/en/documents/collection-of-previous-presidencies/leaders-declarations>

Christensen, S. F. & Xing, L. (2016). "The emerging powers and the emerging world order: Back to the future?" In S. F. Christensen et. al. (Eds.), *Emerging powers, emerging markets, emerging societies*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York, (p. 3-29).



Ciddi, S. (2022). "Turkey and the West: Dealignment in contemporary times." In J. Jongerden (Ed.), *The routledge handbook on contemporary Turkey*. Routledge: Oxon & New York, (p. 469-479).

Cop, B. & Zihnioğlu Ö. (2017). 'Turkish foreign policy under AKP rule: Making sense of the turbulence.' *Political Studies Review*. 15(1), 28–38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1478-9302.12088>

Cornell, S. E. (2012). 'Changes in Turkey: What drives Turkish foreign policy?' *Middle East Quarterly*. 19(1), 13-24.

Coşkun, B. B. (2015). "Neighbourhood narratives from 'zero problems with neighbours' to 'precious loneliness': Turkey's resecuritized Middle East policy after the Arab Spring." In E. Monier (Ed.), *Regional insecurity after the Arab Uprisings*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York, (p. 187-203).

Criss, N. B. (2017). "Turkey's foreign policies during the interwar period (1923–1939)." P. Gözen Ercan (Ed.), *Turkish foreign policy*. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, (p. 17-38).

Crowe, B. (2003). 'A common European foreign policy after Iraq?'. *International affairs*. 79(3), 533-546. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.00321>

Çınar, M. (2018). 'Turkey's 'Western' or 'Muslim' identity and the AKP's civilizational discourse.' *Turkish studies*, 19(2), 176-197.

Daily Sabah. (2018, July 28). Erdoğan: Turkey seeks to enhance collaboration with BRICS countries. [Consulted on May 11, 2025] <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2018/07/28/erdogan-turkey-seeks-to-enhance-collaboration-with-brics-countries>

Demir, B. (2024, September 17). What does Turkey's application to join BRICS mean?. In the world socialist Website [online]. [Consulted on May 11, 2025] <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2024/09/17/ccze-s17.html>

Dinçşahin, Ş. (2012). 'A Symptomatic analysis of the Justice and Development Party's populism in Turkey, 2007-2010'. *Government and Opposition*. 47(4), 618-640. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2012.01377.x>

DW. (2024, September 15). Will Turkey's bid to join BRICS speed up EU accession?. (Consulted on May 11, 2025). <https://www.dw.com/en/will-turkeys-bid-to-join-brics-speed-up-eu-accession/a-70208316>,

Erdoğan, S. (2019). 'The Role of Turgut Özal in Turkey's application to the European Union full membership in 1987'. *İmgelem*. 3(5), 239-254.

---. (2024). "Avrupa Birliği süreci: İkircikli bir siyasal ilişkinin portresi." In A. Bozkurt (Ed.), *Türkiye'nin yüz yılı: Türk dış politikası*. Nokta Yayınları: İstanbul, (p. 131-178).

Erşen, E. (2019). "The return of Eurasianism in Turkey: Relations with Russia and beyond." In E. Erşen & S. Köstem (Eds.), *Turkey's pivot to Eurasia geopolitics and foreign policy in a changing world order*. Routledge: London, (p. 31-47).



Gökay, B. (2024). Turkey's BRICS bid is a high-stakes hedge against the West. In Asia Times [online]. [Consulted on May 11, 2025] https://asiatimes.com/2024/10/turkeys-brics-bid-a-high-stakes-hedge-against-the-west/?utm_source=chatgpt.com#,

Hacaoglu, S. & Kozok F. (2024). Turkey bids to join BRICS in push to build alliances beyond West. In Bloomberg [online]. [Consulted on April 13, 2025] <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-09-02/turkey-submits-bid-to-join-brics-as-erdogan-pushes-for-new-alliances-beyond-west?embedded-checkout=true>,

Hazır, Ü. N. (2022). 'Anti-Westernism in Turkey's Neo-Ottomanist foreign policy under Erdoğan'. *Russia in global affairs*. 20(2), 164-183. 10.31278/1810-6374-2022-20-2-164-183

Heinz, K. (2007). 'EU-Turkey negotiations: Still in the "Cyprus impasse"'. SWP Comments, 1, Stiftung wissenschaft und politik (SWP), Berlin Helleiner, E. & Wang H. (2018). 'Limits to the BRICS' challenge: credit rating reform and institutional innovation in global finance'. *Review of International Political Economy*. 25(5), 573-595. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2018.1490330>

Kaliber, A. (2014). 'Europeanization in Turkey: In search of a new paradigm of modernisation'. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*. 16(1), 30-46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2013.864182>

Kaliber, A. & Kaliber, E. (2019). 'From De-Europeanisation to anti-Western populism: Turkish foreign policy in flux'. *The International spectator*. 54(4), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2019.1668640>

Karakoç, J. & Ersoy D. (2024). 'Turkish foreign policy in the nexus between securitisation and populism'. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*. 27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2024.2414168>

Karaömeroğlu, M. A. (2022). "Populism in Turkey: From a political style to a model for global politics?" In J. Jongerden (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook on contemporary Turkey*. Routledge. Oxon & New York, (p. 75-88).

Kirişçi, K. (2020). *Turkey and the West: Fault Lines in a Troubled Alliance*. Brookings Institution Press.

Kutlay, M. & Öniş Z. (2021). 'Turkish foreign policy in a post-western order: strategic autonomy or new forms of dependence?'. *International affairs*. 97(4), 1085-1104. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab094>

Lippe, J. M. V. (2000). 'Forgotten brigade of the forgotten war: Turkey's participation in the Korean War'. *Middle Eastern studies*. 36(1), 92-102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200008701299>

Lissovlik, Y. & Vinokurov, E. (2019). 'Extending BRICS to BRICS+: The potential for development finance, connectivity and financial stability'. *Area development and policy*. 4(2), 117-133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23792949.2018.1535246>

Martin, L. G. (2025). 'Challenging friends: Türkiye-U.S. relations'. *All Azimuth*. 14(1), 3-19. Doi:10.20991/allazimuth.1532722



Monceau, N. (2023). "Turkey and Europe, an ambivalent relationship since the establishment of the Turkish Republic." In B. Balci & N. Monceau (Eds.), *Turkey, a century of change in state and society*. Springer Nature: Cham, (p. 163-187).

Müftüler-Baç, M. (1996). 'Turkey's predicament in the post-Cold War Era'. *Futures*. 28(3), 255-268.

---. (2005). 'Turkey's political reforms and the impact of the European Union'. *South European society and politics*. 10(1), 17-31.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13608740500037916>

Neset, S. (2023). 'What Turkey wants: Turkey's objection to Finland and Sweden's NATO Membership Applications'. *IFS Insights*, 3.

Norman, I. A. (2024, October 24). Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand become partner countries of BRICS. In *Channel News Asia* [online]. [Consulted on May 11, 2025]
<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-indonesia-vietnam-thailand-brics-asean-global-south-russia-china-4699841>

OECD. (2023). *Economic surveys Türkiye 2023*. [Consulted on May 11, 2025]
https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-economic-surveys-turkiye-2023_864ab2ba-en.html

Oğuzlu, T. H. (2003). 'An analysis of Turkey's prospective membership in the European Union from a 'security' perspective.'" *Security Dialogue*. 34(3), 285-299.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/09670106030343004>

---. (2018). 'Turkish foreign policy in a changing world order'. *All azimuth*. 9(1), 127-139. 10.20991/allazimuth.464076---. (2019). "Turkey and the West: Geopolitical shifts in the AK Party era." In E. Erşen & S. Köstem (Eds.), *Turkey's pivot to Eurasia: Geopolitics and foreign policy in a changing world order*. Routledge: London, (p. 15-30).

Orton, K. (2016). 'Turkey and the West in Syria: Course correction'. *Centre for the response to radicalisation and terrorism policy paper*. 7.

Outzen, R. (2025). 'Costly Incrementalism: U.S. PKK policy and relations with Türkiye'. *All Azimuth*. 14(1), 20-41. 10.20991/allazimuth.1448027

Ovalı, Ş. & Özdikmenli, I. (2020). 'Ideologies and the Western question in Turkish foreign policy: A Neo-classical realist perspective'. *All azimuth*. 9(1), 105-126. 10.20991/allazimuth.514465

Öniş, Z. & Uluyol Y. (2025). 'Middle powers between the West and the "rest": Turkey during the Russian war on Ukraine'. *Uluslararası ilişkiler*. 22(86), 5 - 25.
<https://doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.1667320>

Özpek, B. B., & Tanriverdi-Yaşar, N. (2017). 'Populism and foreign policy in Turkey under the AKP rule'. *Turkish studies*. 19(2), 198-216.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2017.1400912>

PBS News. (2024, September 4). Turkey applies to join China and Russia in the BRICS economic bloc, the Kremlin says. [Consulted on April 13, 2025]



<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/turkey-applies-to-join-china-and-russia-in-brics-economic-bloc-kremlin-says?utm>

Reuters. (2024a, November 14). BRICS offered Turkey partner country status, the Turkish trade minister says. [Consulted on May 11, 2025] <https://www.reuters.com/world/brics-offered-turkey-partner-country-status-turkish-trade-minister-says-2024-11-14/?utm>

---. (2024b, June 4). Kremlin welcomes Turkey's reported desire to join BRICS. [Consulted on April 11, 2025] <https://www.reuters.com/world/kremlin-welcomes-turkeys-reported-desire-join-brics-2024-06-04/?utm>.

Sözen, A. (2010). 'A paradigm shift in Turkish foreign policy: Transition and challenges'. Turkish studies. 11(1), 103–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683841003747062>

Strachota, K. & Wilk, A. (2019). 'The S-400 for Turkey: The crisis in Turkish-American relations escalates'. Centre of Eastern Studies Commentary. 305, 1-9.

Stuenkel, O. (2015). The BRICS and the future of global order. Lexington Books: Maryland.

Şahin, M. (2020). 'Theorising the change: A neoclassical realist approach to Turkish foreign policy'. Contemporary review of the Middle East. 7(4), 483-500. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798920940078>

Şahin, S. (2025). 'From heroism to victimhood: Sèvres narrative and trauma of victimisation in Turkey'. American journal of cultural sociology. 13, 189-213. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-024-00222-y>

Taspınar, Ö. (2011). 'The three strategic visions of Turkey'. Brookings US–Europe analysis series. 50, 1-5.

The Times of India. (2024, October 23). Brics Summit 2024 Live: India is ready to welcome new countries as a Brics Partner Country, says PM Modi. [Consulted on April 13, 2025] <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/brics-summit-2024-kazan-russia-live-updates-pm-narendra-modi-xi-jinping-recep-tayyip-erdogan-masoud-pezeshehian-vladimir-putin/liveblog/114439931.cms?utm>

Tocci, N. (2012). 'Let's talk Turkey! US influence on EU–Turkey relations. Cambridge review of international affairs. 25(3), 399-416. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2011.646243>

Trifković, S. (2011). 'Turkey as a regional power: Neo-Ottomanism in action'. Politeia. 2, 83-95.

Turhan, E. (2025). 'Turkey as a "Geopolitical Other": The construction of European identities in the geopolitical era and its implications for EU-Turkey relations'. European journal of risk regulation. 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/err.2025.10028>

Yanık, L. K. (2023). 'Turkey and the Russian invasion of Ukraine: an interplay of bloc (de)formation, recognition and asymmetric interdependencies?'. Globalizations, 20(7), 1214-1226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2023.2232189>



- Yalvaç, F. (2016). 'A historical materialist analysis of Turkish foreign policy: Class, state, and hegemony'. *Uluslararası ilişkiler*. 13(52), 3–22.
<https://doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.463081>
- Yeşiltaş, M. (2009). 'Soft balancing in Turkish foreign policy: The case of the 2003 Iraq War'. *Perceptions*, 14(1), 25-51.
- Yılmaz, G. (2016). 'From Europeanization to De-Europeanization: The Europeanization process of Turkey in 1999–2014'. *Journal of contemporary European studies*, 24(1), 86-100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2015.1038226>
- Varma, A. (2024, November 4). Fact-Check: India did not block Turkey's BRICS membership bid. In the Quint [online]. [Consulted on April 11, 2025] [Fact-Check: Viral Posts Falsely Claim India 'Blocked' Turkey From Joining BRICS Due to Close Ties With Pakistan](#)
- Waldman, S. (2024, October 31). Turkey, BRICS and Erdogan's global aspirations. In Rusi [online]. [Consulted on May 11, 2025] <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/turkey-brics-and-erdogans-global-aspirations>

EMERGING POWERS' STRATEGY FOR POWER PROJECTION: NIGERIA'S PEACEKEEPING THROUGH REGIONAL & INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

YUNUS ÖZTÜRK

y.ozturk@erdogan.edu.tr

Lecturer at the Department of International Relations, Recep Tayyip Erdogan University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences (Turkey). ORCID: 0000-0002-6274-5230

Abstract

This study investigates Nigeria's strategic utilisation of peacekeeping missions as an instrument for regional influence in the post-Cold War African context. The restructuring of global security arrangements following the Cold War created avenues for emerging powers to redefine their regional roles and assert their influence, with Nigeria emerging as a leading contributor to peacekeeping missions in several war-torn African countries. This study examines Nigeria's commitment to peacekeeping with a focus on its engagement at the regional and global levels, to maximise its strategic interest while minimising resistance to its hegemonic aspirations by Francophone West African states. Through a comparative case analysis of Nigerian involvement in ECOWAS peace operations in Liberia (1989-1997) and Sierra Leone (1997-2002), alongside its participation in the UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur, Sudan (2007-2020), and employing an eclectic theoretical approach, this study demonstrates (i) Nigeria's strategic rationale for prioritizing regional peacekeeping mechanisms over global ones, (ii) the impact of Nigeria's approach on its regional leadership position, and (iii) the challenges Nigeria faced in maintaining such a security framework. By indicating how Nigeria leverage peacekeeping missions to enhance international prestige and legitimise hegemonic aspirations while navigating resource constraints and neighbouring states' suspicions, the study aims to contribute to scholarly debate on the intersection between emerging powers, peacekeeping, and regionalism.

Keywords

ECOWAS, Hegemony, Nigeria, Peacekeeping, Regionalism.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a utilização estratégica das missões de manutenção da paz pela Nigéria como instrumento de influência regional no contexto africano pós-Guerra Fria. A reestruturação dos acordos de segurança global após a Guerra Fria criou caminhos para que potências emergentes redefiníssem os seus papéis regionais e afirmassem a sua influência, com a Nigéria a emergir como um dos principais contribuintes para missões de manutenção



da paz em vários países africanos devastados pela guerra. Este estudo examina o compromisso da Nigéria com a manutenção da paz, com foco no seu envolvimento a nível regional e global, para maximizar o seu interesse estratégico e minimizar a resistência às suas aspirações hegemónicas por parte dos Estados francófonos da África Ocidental. Através de uma análise comparativa do envolvimento nigeriano nas operações de paz da CEDEAO na Libéria (1989-1997) e na Serra Leoa (1997-2002), juntamente com a sua participação na Operação Híbrida da ONU-UA em Darfur, Sudão (2007-2020), e empregando uma abordagem teórica eclética, este estudo demonstra (i) a lógica estratégica da Nigéria para dar prioridade aos mecanismos regionais de manutenção da paz em detrimento dos globais, (ii) o impacto da abordagem da Nigéria na sua posição de liderança regional e (iii) os desafios que a Nigéria enfrentou para manter tal quadro de segurança. Ao indicar como a Nigéria aproveita as missões de manutenção da paz para aumentar o prestígio internacional e legitimar as aspirações hegemónicas, ao mesmo tempo que lida com as restrições de recursos e as suspeitas dos Estados vizinhos, o estudo visa contribuir para o debate académico sobre a interseção entre potências emergentes, manutenção da paz e regionalismo.

Palavras-chave

CEDEAO, Hegemonia, Nigéria, Manutenção da Paz, Regionalismo.

How to cite this article

Öztürk, Yunus (2025). *Emerging Powers' Strategy for Power Projection: Nigeria's Peacekeeping Through Regional & International Organizations*. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - *Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations*, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 205-229. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.11>

Article submitted on 13th May 2025 and accepted for publication on 15th September 2025.





EMERGING POWERS' STRATEGY FOR POWER PROJECTION: NIGERIA'S PEACEKEEPING THROUGH REGIONAL & INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

YUNUS ÖZTÜRK

Introduction

In the post-Cold War era, the increasing role of regional organisations, such as the African Union, the Organisation of American States (OAS), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in conflict management and international peacekeeping has been supported by Western powers, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. These Western powers have promoted regional organisations as the primary responsible actors for managing security challenges in their respective regions, under the motto of "African solutions for African problems" in the African continent. In this context, Nigeria has emerged as a leading contributor to peacekeeping missions since the early 1990s, deploying funds and troops to several operations across the African continent under the auspices of the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Williams, 2008). Nigeria deployed over 200,000 soldiers to peacekeeping missions throughout the world from its independence in 1960 to the late 2000s, accounting for almost 40% of all UN peacekeeping missions in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Europe (Adebajo, 2008, p. 14). To resolve the crises in the Mano River Basin, which lasted over a decade in the 1990s, for instance, Nigeria sacrificed over 1,500 of its soldiers and invested more than \$12 billion in peacekeeping missions, despite its own dire economic conditions at that time (Adebajo, 2008, p. 20; Bah, 2005, p. 78). Specifically, Nigeria provided about 90% of funding and 80% of personnel for these peacekeeping missions – contributing 12,000 soldiers out of 16,000 to Liberia and another 12,000 of 13,000 to Sierra Leone (Obi, 2009, pp. 121–122, 125). This substantial commitment to regional security through the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) clearly reflects Nigeria's ambitions in West Africa: its utilization of peacekeeping missions as an instrument of regional leadership despite its small Francophone neighbours' fears following the withdrawal of the Cold War overlay and the reduction of French military presence in the post-1990 period (Bah, 2005, pp. 79–80).

The end of the Cold War initiated a restructuring of global security arrangements in the developing world, compelling regional powers to take responsibility for addressing their common problems, which created avenues for emerging powers to redefine their goals and assert their leadership in the regional security structure of Africa, Latin America, the



Middle East, and Asia (Söderbaum & Tavares, 2009). Although the UN remains a key player in maintaining peace and security throughout the world, its overstretch due to resource limitations and high demand across multiple conflict zones, along with the lack of political will by Western powers, has led to regional organisations expanding their security mandates. This generated what Brosig (2013, p. 171) describes as “emerging security regime complex[es],” characterised by overlapping institutional frameworks and responsibilities conducted by both African and non-African actors simultaneously on the continent. What Nigeria has been pursuing within this context is, as Adebajo (2008, p. 14) calls, “hegemony on a shoestring,” an ambitious strategy of regional leadership despite significant constraints.

The Nigerian case exemplifies a dual engagement strategy employed by emerging powers whereby they endeavour to enhance their regional influence through regional organisations while maintaining their engagement with global institutions like the UN. Since the 1990s, Nigeria has been at the forefront of constructing a regional security mechanism in Africa through ECOWAS and AU engagements while maintaining its consistent participation in UN peacekeeping missions throughout the continent. This dual engagement strategy inevitably raises important questions with regard to Nigeria’s foreign policy goals. If global institutions like the UN are considered somehow adequate for maintaining peace and security in the world, why do emerging powers like Nigeria prioritise regional organisations for specific initiatives such as peacekeeping? More broadly, do regional organisations generally function as complementary frameworks to global institutions, or do they merely indicate a shift toward regionalism in international politics?

Nigeria’s engagements with regional and global institutions in peacekeeping deserve particular attention for several reasons. First, the “messianic references” by Nigerian political and military elites to power projection capabilities in the region indicate a widespread belief that Nigeria has a “manifest destiny” for regional leadership as West Africa’s largest economy and most populous nation (Bach, 2007). Second, Nigerian active participation in West African peacekeeping missions offers valuable insights into how emerging powers can utilise regional organisations to legitimise their leadership role or reach hegemonic aspirations in their respective domains (Obi, 2009). Last, Nigerian involvement in both regional (Liberia and Sierra Leone) and hybrid (Sudan) peacekeeping operations provides an opportunity to examine the strategic interplay between regional and global security engagements in an emerging power’s foreign policy.

Since the 1990s, the increasing number of peacekeeping operations by regional organisations such as the AU, ECOWAS, and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has, unsurprisingly, received scholarly attention, including works by Adebajo, Bellamy, and Williams. Analysing the peacekeeping trend toward non-UN peace operations, for instance, Bellamy & Williams (2005) show that regional organisations possess significant advantages in legitimacy, local support, and cultural understanding due to their proximity to conflict zones. Peace operations conducted by individual states or coalitions of the willing, on the other hand, often face accusations of neocolonialism or pursuit of parochial interests, rather than upholding the UN’s principles and purposes. Despite these theoretical arguments favouring regional initiatives in peacekeeping, Williams (2008) persuasively argues that the “African solutions for African problems”



mantra has significant limitations regarding capacity, resources, and competitive interests of regional actors. Within this scholarly debate, the evolution of West African security architecture since the 1970s provides a critical context for understanding regional powers' peacekeeping strategies. Through Nigeria's transformational leadership in ECOWAS/ECOMOG peacekeeping missions, West Africa has gradually evolved from a mere "security complex" characterised mainly by security dynamics and, thus, mutual suspicion among regional actors, into a "security community" with shared norms, values, and practices (Bah, 2005; Jaye, 2008). Nevertheless, the West African security complex/community and Nigerian leadership position, in particular, have continuously faced significant constraints. As Bach (2007) notes, Nigerian regional ambitions reflect a position of "dominance without power," indicating grandiose roles and goals but limited capacity and resources. Furthermore, these constraints extend beyond limited resources and capacity to negative perceptions of Nigerian hegemonic ambitions by Francophone neighbouring states in the region (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2003).

In this context, this paper posits that Nigerian dual engagement with regional organisations (e.g., ECOWAS, AU) and global institutions (e.g., UN) in peacekeeping demonstrates a calculated approach to maximise its strategic interests in West Africa while minimising potential risks and costs associated with hegemonic aspirations. Drawing on Prys's (2010) typology of regional powers and particularly Pedersen's (2002) conceptualization of "cooperative hegemony," which explains how pivotal states mitigate resistance from counter-hegemonic blocs of smaller states through regional multilateralism, this paper contends that Nigerian peacekeeping strategy creates multiple avenues for projecting regional and international influence through participation in both regional and global organizations while mitigating the associated risks and costs. This approach enables Nigeria to demonstrate its commitment to regional stability, thereby enhancing its international prestige as a peace broker, while minimising expenditures of blood and treasure.

Through a comparative analysis of Nigerian peacekeeping missions in ECOWAS peace operations in Liberia (1989-1997) and Sierra Leone (1997-2002) as well as its participation in the UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur, Sudan (2007-2020), this study examines (i) the factors behind Nigeria's rationale for prioritizing regional peacekeeping mechanisms over global initiatives, (ii) the impact of such prioritization on Nigerian regional leadership in West Africa, and (iii) the challenges Nigeria faces in maintaining the regional framework and implications of such challenges for its regional influence. The analysis primarily draws on primary sources, including official documents from ECOWAS, the AU, and the UN, supplemented by secondary literature, such as historical analyses and theoretical frameworks on peacekeeping and emerging powers' power projections. With these objectives and methods, this research aims to contribute to the scholarly debate on the intersection between emerging powers, peacekeeping, and regionalism. While advancing theoretical understanding of how emerging powers utilise peacekeeping missions as a strategic tool for their regional influence and legitimacy, the study also provides empirical insights into the complex interplay of regional and global security initiatives in Africa. Furthermore, it assesses the sustainability challenges confronting many African peacekeeping missions.



The paper proceeds as follows. Reviewing relevant literature on regional powers, peacekeeping, and African security architecture, the first section establishes the theoretical framework for understanding peacekeeping as a strategic tool for regional power projection. After briefly outlining the methodology in section two, the third section examines the historical evolution of Nigerian peacekeeping strategy in Africa in relation to Nigerian foreign policy. The following section analyses the three case studies in depth, namely Nigerian peacekeeping operations in (i) Liberia and (ii) Sierra Leone under ECOWAS and (iii) its participation in the UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur. Synthesising the findings from these case studies, the final section concludes with the significance of the findings for understanding emerging powers' strategic approaches to regional organisations and regional security frameworks in a complex international order.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Any study on regional powers' peacekeeping strategy requires a theoretical framework that thoroughly addresses regional power dynamics and institutional arrangements. No consensus, however, exists in the relevant literature on how to identify and differentiate regional powers from middle and great powers. Nolte (2010, p. 893), in this regard, offers a comprehensive definition of regional powers based on an extensive literature review, conceptualising regional powers as possessing not only superior economic resources and military capabilities but also the will to assume regional responsibilities and leadership recognition by other actors. This definition highlights three crucial aspects of regional powerhood, namely (i) superior material resources and capabilities relative to other regional actors, (ii) leadership will and commitment to regional responsibilities, and (iii) acceptance of that leadership by regional and international actors. This multidimensional framework explains why Nigeria, despite its constraints, has consistently pursued regional power status as West Africa's gendarme through peacekeeping initiatives (Adebajo, 2000). Nigeria possesses relatively superior resources as well as capabilities and demonstrates the will to act as a responsible regional leader. However, its leadership ambitions have been repeatedly challenged by smaller neighbouring states concerned about Nigerian hegemonic aspirations, contributing to an enduring, albeit diminishing, French military presence in the region after the Cold War. Accordingly, Adebajo & Landsberg (2003, pp. 171–172) characterise Nigeria's regional role as an "aspiring or potential hegemon" or a "pivotal state," rather than a consolidated regional hegemon. Contemporary analysis confirms that Nigeria's hegemonic role within ECOWAS faces significant constraints, as the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS in 2024 due to military coups demonstrates the limitations of traditional hegemonic models, particularly when domestic challenges undermine regional leadership in West Africa (Gbenga & Oluwatobi, 2025). This also aligns with the International Crisis Group's report (2024), arguing that Nigeria's influence has waned over the past 15 years, along with its contributions to continental peace and security, due to weak leadership, political and economic crises, and acute security issues at home.

Building on Nolte's (2010) conceptualisation, Prys (2010) develops a typology of regional powers, distinguishing regional hegemonic, dominating, and detached powers, which is a central framework to this study. The hegemonic model features a regional power



perceived as exceptional, exercising leadership multilaterally through normative and institutional mechanisms while providing public goods, such as security, for all. The dominator model, however, relies on coercion, with the dominant power pursuing parochial interests through unilateral actions rather than being recognised as an exceptional leader. Unlike hegemons, dominators compel others to contribute to regional arrangements rather than providing public goods unilaterally. Detached powers, in turn, possess the necessary material resources and military capabilities but lack leadership will, prioritising domestic or global concerns over regional engagement. Consequently, their interactions with regional actors remain limited, exerting minimal influence on regional affairs. Moreover, despite their resource abundance and capabilities, they are not recognised as regional leaders (Prys, 2010, pp. 487–496).

While Nigeria's position in West Africa aligns most closely with the hegemonic model in Prys's (2010) typology, Pedersen's (2002) conceptualisation of "cooperative hegemony" provides a more nuanced and accurate depiction. Cooperative hegemons essentially establish stable, predictable, and somehow legitimate governance by encouraging participation in regional initiatives through indirect influence, multilateral arrangements, and mechanisms preventing free riding (Pedersen, 2002, pp. 683–688). Under this framework, Nigeria exercises regional leadership through multilateral institutional frameworks and mechanisms like ECOWAS/ECOMOG, designed specifically to minimise potential resistance from smaller Francophone states in West Africa. That is to say, Nigeria strategically utilises regional peacekeeping missions under ECOWAS as power projection tools in West Africa. As Beswick (2010) clearly demonstrates in her analysis of Rwanda's contribution to peacekeeping missions in Darfur, peacekeeping allows even small states to gain operational experience for their military forces while simultaneously reaffirming commitment to international norms, strengthening regional influence, and enhancing international prestige. For Nigeria, often referred to as the "Giant of Africa" (Adebajo, 2008, p. 12), regional peacekeeping missions translate its demographic and economic advantages into regional leadership while mitigating fears of hegemonic ambitions among smaller Francophone states through participation in regional organisations.

As often stated, the end of the Cold War created multiple avenues for emerging powers to exercise influence through evolving regional security architectures. Although this development has produced "security regime complexes" where multiple actors, institutions, norms and mandates play overlapping roles, resulting in inefficiency and resource wastage (Brosig, 2013), regional powers have increasingly leveraged peacekeeping initiatives to project influence in these complex environments. The post-Cold War trend toward regionalisation of peacekeeping offers several advantages for regional actors, including enhanced legitimacy, cultural awareness, and local knowledge due to their proximity to conflict zones. Moreover, regional peacekeeping initiatives reportedly allow for more flexible interpretation of mission mandates than the UN missions' doctrinal approach. Through examining how peace enforcement mechanisms are understood differently by the UN and AU, De Coning (2017) demonstrates that regional mechanisms provide greater flexibility for conducting effective operations compared to the UN's strict doctrinal approach. This adaptability enables more effective and responsive interventions to regional conflicts on behalf of the international



community (Bellamy & Williams, 2005, pp. 159–167). Within the African security regime complex, where shared regional understanding facilitates more assertive peacekeeping missions than those led by the UN, Nigeria strategically utilises regional organisations to maximise its influence while sharing peacekeeping burdens that would be impossible under strict UN peacekeeping principles, namely consent, impartiality, and the limited use of force. This approach explains Nigeria's prioritisation of regional organisations like ECOWAS for peace interventions in West Africa while simultaneously engaging with AU and UN peacekeeping operations throughout (and beyond) the continent as a strategic portfolio.

The evolution of African security architecture, in particular, reflects broader normative shifts with regard to African conflict management, where two emerging powers, Nigeria and South Africa, have leveraged peacekeeping to assert leadership in their respective regions without necessarily contradicting sovereignty norms (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2003). While the Charter of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), particularly Articles II and III, emphasized the Westphalian notion of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and "non-interference" since the 1963 founding conference in Addis Ababa (OAU, 1963), the Pan-Africanist vision of Nkrumah championed by Nigerian leader Obasanjo and South African leader Mbeki during the late 1990s facilitated a gradual normative shift from a state-centric regime survival approach to a more human security-oriented one.¹ The imperative for such a shift from "non-interference" to "non-indifference" became evident through multiple humanitarian catastrophes on the continent, particularly the Rwandan, Liberian, and Somali civil wars.

The end of the Cold War and the subsequent call for "African solutions for African [security] problems" by both African and Western leaders, along with the OAU's failed peace initiatives in the continent (e.g., Chad), renewed aspirations for an "African Renaissance" and continental unity, culminating in the establishment of the African Union (AU) in 2002. More importantly, compared to the OAU Charter, the AU Constitutive Act imposes strict limitations on the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference, particularly Articles III and IV (OAU, 2000), making it the first international treaty recognizing the right to use military interventions by an international organization in its members' domestic politics (Franke, 2009, pp. 102–106; Kindiki, 2007, pp. 44–48). As Franke succinctly puts it:

Under the AU, member states enjoy the privileges of sovereignty, such as non-interference in their internal affairs, only as long as they fulfil their responsibility to protect their citizens. If, however, states fail, for whatever reasons, to honour this responsibility, the AU reserves for itself the right to intervene pursuant to a decision of the Assembly in respect of grave circumstances, namely war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity" (2009, p. 106).

¹ The Libyan leader Ghaddafi also proposed creating the "United States of Africa" in Sirte in 1999, advocating for a continental organization focusing on collective security and conflict management. This proposal was welcomed by both Mbeki and Obasanjo as it could potentially advance their reform agenda for the OAU. For more information why these three leaders spearheaded the transformation of the OAU into the AU and how they accommodated their diverging reform proposals, see Tieku (2004, pp. 253–265).



The reappraisal of security cooperation in Africa during the 1990s ultimately led to the establishment of the African Union in Durban in 2002, which institutionalised the principle of “non-indifference” and consequently created a considerably more proactive peace and security framework. This new framework has created a plethora of multi-layered security arrangements with several regional organisations (e.g., ECOWAS, SADC, IGAD, ECCAS, and AMU; Franke, 2009, pp. 63–76) along with the newly branded continental organisation, the African Union. Such a cooperative structure, however, does not necessarily undermine the authority and responsibility of regional organisations. Instead, the AU has benefitted from their experience and comparative advantages for peace operations. In this emerging decentralised security arrangement, the AU has served as a “clearinghouse and framework for all initiatives, thus filling the conceptual and institutional gap between the global level (the United Nations) and the regional level” (Franke, 2009, p. 107). The regional organisations, in turn, have become responsible actors in establishing continental security by eliminating potential competition among various actors at multiple levels. Although such a security framework is criticised for creating additional bureaucracy and thus preventing timely responses to grave circumstances, the injection of all actors’ stakes into the process makes it less likely to fail (Franke, 2009, pp. 106–107).

The new African security mechanism, which gives African states agency in security arrangements under the “African solutions for African problems” discourse, on the other hand, faces substantial challenges before achieving success, particularly resource limitations and capacity issues. These constraints provide context for Nigeria’s dilemma, as it oscillates between hegemonic aspirations and leadership constraints due to insufficient resources and limited recognition from small Francophone states in West Africa. Nigerian dual engagement with regional and global institutions for peacekeeping emerges from this dilemma, what Adebajo (2008) terms “hegemony on a shoestring,” indicating an ambitious peacekeeping strategy for regional leadership despite significant constraints.² The Mano River Basin crises of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire, in particular, illustrate these challenges. In these cases, Nigeria-led ECOWAS missions played a more significant role than the UN during the initial phases of peace processes. In each intervention, the UN Security Council was reluctant to take a leading role initially; instead, it opted to support ECOWAS missions politically and financially to maintain regional stability. Yet when it became evident that ECOWAS was unable to exercise its mandate properly due to resource constraints, the UN subsequently took over the missions and played a decisive role in the outcome. Moreover, former colonisers, Britain and France, provided financial and military support to peace operations in Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire, respectively, before the UN takeover. The common problems in these interventions were ECOWAS’s lack of resources and capacity to run the operations, and the lack of unity between ECOWAS and the UN for effective operations (Adebajo, 2011, Chapter 5; Iwilade & Agbo, 2012). Clearly, Nigeria strategically utilised peacekeeping initiatives as a tool of influence in the Mano River Basin crises while sharing the burdens with other countries through both regional and global institutions, thereby gaining

² For more information on what this term encapsulates, see Adebajo & Landsberg (2003, Chapter 9).



international prestige and recognition while minimising expenditure of blood and treasure.

Methodology

Despite extensive literature on the regional security framework in Africa (e.g., Adebajo (2011); Baregu & Landsberg (2003); Bellamy & Williams (2005); Brosig (2013); Franke (2009)), significant gaps remain in understanding Nigeria's dual engagement strategy with regional and global institutions in peacekeeping. Barnett & Finnemore (2004), for instance, provide a theoretical framework for analysing how international organisations exercise power; however, they devote insufficient attention to how regional powers strategically navigate multiple institutional frameworks to enhance their international influence, as observed in West Africa. Put differently, the existing literature offers limited analysis of how emerging powers like Nigeria balance hegemonic aspirations in West Africa with resource and leadership constraints through institutional mechanisms, such as ECOWAS, AU, and UN. Although Adebajo (2002a) provides a detailed account of specific peacekeeping operations in West Africa, there remains a need for a systematic analysis of how Nigeria's peacekeeping engagements form a coherent strategy for international recognition, influence, and prestige. The continued relevance of examining Nigeria's dual engagement strategy is also underscored by recent regional crises that have fundamentally challenged ECOWAS's effectiveness and Nigeria's hegemonic capacity (International Crisis Group, 2024; Gbenga & Oluwatobi, 2025), making this study particularly timely for understanding the limits of regional hegemonic power. This study, therefore, endeavours to address this gap by investigating Nigeria's engagement with regional and global institutions (ECOWAS, AU, and UN) in peacekeeping, conceptualising these engagements as a calculated approach to both opportunities and constraints in the evolving regional and global security landscape rather than discrete commitments for regional peace and stability.

To this end, this study employs a comparative case study approach to examine the Nigerian dual engagement strategy for regional power projection through peacekeeping operations. Drawing from methodological approaches of Tardy & Wyss (2014) and Van der Lijn & Avezov (2015), which analyze African peacekeeping frameworks and operations (*a.k.a.* Africa as "the peacekeeping laboratory") by focusing on institutional arrangements, operational implementation, and stakeholder responses, the study examines three carefully-selected cases representing different dimensions of Nigerian peacekeeping strategy: ECOWAS interventions in (i) Liberia (1989-1997) and (ii) Sierra Leone (1997-2002) and (iii) the UN-AU Hybrid Operation (UNAMID) in Darfur, Sudan (2007-2020). These cases were selected based on the following three criteria: (i) temporal variation to capture Nigeria's evolving peacekeeping strategy, (ii) institutional diversity to examine Nigeria's engagements across different frameworks, and (iii) strategic significance for Nigeria's hegemonic aspirations. To examine these cases, the relevant data is derived from multiple sources to ensure a comprehensive analysis, including primary sources from ECOWAS, AU, and UN documentation, complemented by secondary sources from scholarly literature on Nigeria's foreign policy, regional security dynamics, and peacekeeping operations.



Although such a methodological approach allows for systematic comparison across different peacekeeping contexts while accounting for the complex interplay between hegemonic aspirations and resource constraints, the study acknowledges its certain limitations. First, access to relevant data on the Nigerian decision-making process is constrained by limited transparency in security policies. Second, rather than covering all Nigerian peacekeeping missions, the study instead examines only three representative cases. Last but not least, due to the nature of small-N case analysis, certain causal claims regarding the external validity of these three cases should be presented with caveats. Nevertheless, by examining Nigerian peacekeeping strategy across different institutional frameworks and time periods, this study endeavours to identify patterns in Nigerian peacekeeping while accounting for contextual variations. Consequently, the study reveals how Nigeria navigates the complex interplay between hegemonic aspirations, resource constraints, and institutional arrangements in its pursuit of a strategic dual engagement through peacekeeping.

Historical Context

Nigeria's peacekeeping strategy, which began shortly after independence in 1960 through participation in the UN Operation in the Congo (ONUC), has undergone significant evolution that must be understood within the broader contextual shifts in Nigeria's foreign policy priorities as well as regional leadership aspirations. Such a historical trajectory, no doubt, reveals how Nigerian engagement has gradually transitioned from a primarily UN-focused approach to a more pronounced emphasis on regional frameworks such as the ECOWAS and AU. This evolution, moreover, represents not merely a tactical adjustment but a strategic reorientation of Nigeria's approach to regional security frameworks and arrangements.

As previously noted, Nigeria perceives itself as having a "manifest destiny" in West Africa due to its demographic and economic advantages, while simultaneously functioning as a dominant actor without power, reflecting its challenge of projecting regional influence despite limited resources and capacity constraints (Bach, 2007). Unlike South Africa, another significant hegemonic power emphasising economic integration and institutional development under its regional leadership, Nigeria has primarily utilised security mechanisms, particularly peacekeeping missions, as a cost-effective means of demonstrating its leadership in West Africa (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2003, Chapter 9). The peace operation in Liberia during the 1990s, in particular, shaped Nigeria's subsequent approaches to peacekeeping operations in Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, and Côte d'Ivoire (Obi, 2009, pp. 122–130). These early interventions and experiences have also informed Nigeria's navigation of regional and global peacekeeping frameworks and arrangements. The creation and evolution of regional organisations, such as ECOWAS and the AU, have been significantly shaped by the clash and accommodation of regional powers' interests. In this context, regional powers like Nigeria have sought to influence the institutional design of regional organisations in order to facilitate their leadership aspirations in their respective regions (Tieku, 2004, pp. 250–251).

Although Nigeria's first peacekeeping contributions began shortly after its independence in 1960 with the ONUC, it maintained a consistent, if limited, presence in UN-led peace



operations during the 1960s and 1970s, deploying troops to missions beyond Africa, including the Iran-Iraq border and Lebanon. These early engagements established Nigeria as a significant contributor to international peacekeeping efforts, aligning with its post-civil war foreign policy orientation (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 28–30). Moreover, these initial contributions largely reflected Nigeria's commitment to multilateralism, particularly the UN system, rather than explicit regional leadership aspirations in West Africa. The 1980s, however, marked a transition in Nigeria's strategy towards regional security arrangements. As Bach (2007, p. 303) notes, its growing economic power through oil revenues and demographic weight generated "messianic references" for Nigerian leadership in West Africa. This self-perception was largely considered natural by the Nigerian political elite, given their country's relatively superior economic and demographic advantage compared to small Francophone West African states like Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast). The same period, however, witnessed the limitations of Nigerian regional leadership due to domestic political, economic, and social problems (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 34; Olonisakin, 2000, pp. 117–118), characterizing Nigeria as "dominance without power" and highlighting the gap between Nigeria's hegemonic aspirations and effective capabilities for such a role (Bach, 2007, p. 302). These underlying tensions would eventually shape Nigeria's approach to regional security frameworks and arrangements since the 1990s.

Although Nigerian military regimes under Generals Babangida (1985-1993) and Abacha (1993-1998) were particularly active in developing and supporting the emerging regional security mechanisms in the first three decades following Nigerian independence, the transition to civilian rule under former-General Obasanjo in 1999 paved the way for a more institutionalised approach to Nigeria's peacekeeping strategy. As Olonisakin (2000, Chapter 4) highlights, while the two former leaders eagerly utilized ECOWAS/ECOMOG as a tool for legitimizing their military regimes internationally, showing that Nigeria deserves a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, and projecting Nigeria's power regionally, Obasanjo emphasized multilateral frameworks and regional partnership among Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone countries in West Africa. As mentioned previously, such transition in Nigeria's peacekeeping strategy coincided with the transformation of the OAU into the AU and its new peace and security architecture, in which Nigeria under Obasanjo, along with South Africa's Mbeki and Libyan leader Ghaddafi, played a significant role (Franke, 2009).

A turning point in Nigeria's peacekeeping evolution was the outbreak of Liberian civil war (1989), when growing regional instability in West Africa and limited international response eventually led Nigeria to spearhead the establishment of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in 1990 (Olonisakin, 2000, pp. 91–99). In this first major African-led peacekeeping operation on the continent, Nigeria provided approximately 80% of ECOMOG's troops and contributed almost 90% of its funding (Adebajo, 2002b, p. 48; cf. Olonisakin, 2000, pp. 109–110). This substantial commitment of blood and treasure for West African regional stability enabled Nigeria to largely shape ECOMOG's policies in the region. In other words, the Liberian intervention by ECOMOG represented a watershed moment in West Africa, establishing Nigeria's hegemonic role in regional security arrangements and thus creating an institutional framework through which Nigerian leadership was exercised.



The evolution of ECOWAS's security mechanisms during the 1990s, in particular, reflected Nigeria's strategic vision for West African security framework. As Adebajo & Landsberg (2003, pp. 189–191) and Jaye (2008) demonstrate, the development of ECOWAS from a purely regional economic organization to one with significant security functions under ECOMOG largely occurred under Nigerian leadership and thus mostly reflected its regional security priorities and aspirations. For instance, the 1991 Declaration of Political Principles condemning any seizure of political power by armed force (ECOWAS, 1991), the 1993 revision of the ECOWAS treaty formalizing its fundamental principles and security mandate (ECOWAS, 1993), the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security (ECOWAS, 1999), and the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance emphasizing zero tolerance for political power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means (ECOWAS, 2001), along with the establishment of the Standby Force and the Early Warning System, further institutionalized Nigerian approach to regional security governance and engendered a security culture in West Africa, consisting of new norms, procedures, and capabilities (Jaye, 2008; Aning, 2007). With these new frameworks and arrangements on regional security governance, Nigeria gained legitimate international platforms for exercising leadership while distributing peacekeeping burdens among regional actors, primarily small Francophone states wary of Nigeria's hegemonic aspirations in West Africa, as well as former colonial powers, namely France and Britain.

Nigeria's approach to peacekeeping has been particularly pronounced in West Africa, where it has led contributions to several ECOWAS missions, including Liberia (1989-1997), Sierra Leone (1997-2002), Guinea-Bissau (1998-1999), and Côte d'Ivoire (2002-2004). In these operations, Nigeria followed an institutionalized approach to internal conflicts, demonstrating a consistent pattern of utilizing regional arrangements to address security issues in its immediate neighborhood (Obi, 2009). This regional focus extended beyond mere geographical proximity. Nigeria has also engaged with broader continental security mechanisms, particularly through the AU, with its participation in the UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) representing engagement beyond its immediate neighborhood. Such a scope, undoubtedly, reflects strategic calculations regarding Nigeria's sphere of influence and hegemonic aspirations in the region and the continent. Nevertheless, Nigeria's contributions to peacekeeping operations beyond West Africa remained limited and selective, as its continental aspirations often stretched its limited resources and capabilities, creating tensions between hegemonic aspirations and practical constraints, domestic backlash against hegemonic overextension, and competition with South Africa, which is another potential hegemon in the continent (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2003; Bach, 2007). All these constraints and tensions compelled Nigeria to adopt a more selective stance in peacekeeping engagement within and beyond West Africa.

Case Studies

As outlined in the methodology section, Nigeria's strategy for power projection through peacekeeping can be better understood through examining its engagements across various institutional frameworks and arrangements. This section, therefore, analyzes



three representative cases illustrating Nigeria's approach to peace operations: the ECOWAS interventions in (i) Liberia, (ii) Sierra Leone and (iii) Nigeria's participation in the UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur, Sudan. It is important to highlight that these cases span different time periods, institutional contexts, and regional settings; thus, offering a comprehensive view of Nigeria's strategically calculated and selective peacekeeping approaches.

ECOWAS Intervention in Liberia (1989-1997)

Following Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPLF) attacks against Samuel Doe's regime in the late 1980s,³ the conflict rapidly escalated into a full-scale civil war with unfolding humanitarian disaster and a steady stream of refugees to neighboring countries. As the international community, including Liberia's Cold War patron the US and the UN, remained unwilling to intervene, the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) intervention in the Liberian civil war (1989-1997) became imperative, with Nigeria stepping in as a regional hegemon to fill the security vacuum in West Africa. Although some argue that General Babangida's friendship with Samuel Doe initially motivated the Liberian intervention, the primary concern was that Charles Taylor's successful overthrow of the Liberian government would embolden other rebel groups in the region to challenge central governments (Obi, 2009, p. 122). Nigerian then-President Babangida viewed the unfolding crisis as both a humanitarian emergency as well as a threat to regional stability through its spillover effects in West Africa, thus requiring Nigeria as a regional actor to intervene to mitigate refugee flows and potential regional contagion. Nigeria, however, did not undertake such an operation solely for altruistic reasons. The ECOMOG intervention under ECOWAS also served Nigeria's parochial national interests, including its aspirations for regional hegemony, the protection of Nigerian expatriates in West Africa, and the diversion of domestic socio-economic problems (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 48-49; Adibe, 1997, pp. 473-474).

Table 1. Nigerian Participation in Regional & Continental Peace Operations, Selected Cases

Country	Mission	Type	Mandate	Nigerian Role	Troop Contribution	Command Role	Financial / Logistical Contribution
Liberia	ECOMOG			Dominant	Yes (~80%)	Brigade Commander	Yes (~90%)

³ The NPLF's nucleus comprised approximately 12,500 rebels, primarily Gio soldiers and Nimba farmers who had been marginalized under Samuel Doe's brutal exclusionary regime (Olonisakin, 2000, Chapter 3).



		Peace Enforce- ment	End civil war & restore order				
Sierra Leone	ECOMOG	Peace Enforce- ment	Reverse coup & restore government	Dominant	Yes (~90%)	Brigade Commander	Yes (~90%)
Sudan (Darfur)	UNAMID	Robust Peacekee- -ping (Hybrid)	Protection of civilians, facilitation of humanitarian aid & support peace process	Limited	Yes (~10%)	Force Commander	Not specified

Source: Compiled by the author.

Within a short period of time, Taylor controlled most of Liberia, including the capital Monrovia, which ultimately transformed the Nigerian-led ECOMOG cease-fire monitoring mission into a peace enforcement force to control local developments (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 52; Olonisakin, 2000, pp. 102–107). Rather than acting unilaterally, Nigeria worked through ECOWAS in order to establish ECOMOG as a multinational force, securing support from other West African states including Ghana, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia. Through this multilateral approach, Nigeria gained not only legitimacy for the intervention but also shared the cost and blood with other participating states. Nevertheless, Nigeria's deployment of ECOMOG without a strong legal basis compromised its legitimacy, thus enabling Taylor and the NPLF to challenge the intervention (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 52; Adibe, 1997, pp. 475–476; Olonisakin, 2000, pp. 110–115). Generals Babangida and later Abacha addressed these challenges by emphasizing humanitarian imperatives and regional (in)stability,⁴ thus establishing a precedent for regional intervention in subsequent ECOWAS operations (Arthur, 2010). Despite ECOMOG's initial success in taking control of the capital and forcing rebel factions to sign 14 peace agreements over the years, these accords proved short-lived primarily due to increased fractionalization among Liberian rebel groups (Adebajo, 2002a, Chapter 3). With eight rebel factions divided along ethnic and personal lines during the conflict,⁵ ECOWAS, nevertheless,

⁴ Paradoxically, the leaders of ECOMOG-contributing states, including Nigeria's Babangida and Abacha, had seized power through undemocratic means despite their role in ECOMOG's mission to counter Charles Taylor, a Liberian warlord who had initiated an insurgency against Samuel Doe's brutal regime. This contradiction attracted significant criticism regarding the mission's authenticity when led by former military rulers (Arthur, 2010, p. 10).

⁵ Despite the presence of eight rebel factions fighting during the civil war, none possessed a coherent ideology aimed at fundamental transformation of the Doe regime. Instead, most warlords, including Charles Taylor, focused on private wealth accumulation in a protracted civil war through exploiting Liberia's natural resources, such as diamonds, gold, timber, rubber, and iron ore (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 46–47; Reno, 1998, Chapter 3).



successfully brought Charles Taylor and other potent armed factions to the negotiation table in 1995 to reach a peace agreement under UN supervision, the Abuja Accord. In the ensuing elections in 1997, the National Patriotic Party secured a majority of seats while Taylor became president, winning 75% of the vote (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 63–66; Obi, 2009, pp. 124–127).

In 1998, ECOMOG withdrew from Liberia, leaving the UN mission in its place with limited resources and personnel.⁶ Most Liberians expected that Charles Taylor would embrace peaceful mechanisms rather than pursuing politics through force. Despite optimistic expectations about Liberia's future, Taylor ruled the country with a heavy hand in a way that he distributed economic resources and positions of authority to his loyalists through a winner-take-all approach. The NPLF forces, for instance, were largely converted into regular forces of Liberia, enabling Taylor to rule autocratically (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 67–73). Consequently, Liberia experienced the recurrence of civil war within one year of the 1997 post-conflict elections. During this conflict, both Côte D'Ivoire and Guinea provided financial and military support to Liberian rebel forces fighting against the Taylor regime, namely the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) and the Liberian United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) respectively. By 2003, these two rebel groups had gained control over most of Liberia, placing Taylor in a precarious position. Furthermore, the Sierra Leone Special War Crimes Court indicted Taylor for war crimes in Sierra Leone's civil war (1997–2002), where Taylor had maintained support for the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), along with some rebel groups in Guinea. That same year, a new ECOWAS mission (ECOMIL) was deployed to Monrovia, but this time with the international support. Within a week, Charles Taylor resigned and went into exile, accepting asylum in Nigeria as part of an ECOWAS-brokered Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) (Obi, 2009, p. 124).

Nigeria's material contributions to ECOMOG, and later ECOMIL, in Liberia demonstrated both its commitment to regional hegemony and its inherent constraints. Notably, Nigeria provided approximately 80% of ECOMOG's troops and funded almost 90% of this first major African-led peacekeeping operation on the continent (Adebajo, 2002b, p. 48; cf. Olonisakin, 2000, pp. 109–110). Such commitment reflected Nigeria's material capabilities relative to other regional actors and its willingness to bear the cost and blood of being a regional hegemon. Nigeria's willingness, capabilities, and contributions, however, generated backlash within ECOMOG as other contributing West African countries expressed resentment toward Nigerian dominance in decision-making processes and command structures (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 56; Adibe, 1997, p. 483). As noted above, while ECOMOG was initially designed as a cease-fire monitoring mission, it quickly became an enforcement force against Taylor's powerful rebel force, NPLF. This mission creep resulted primarily from ECOMOG's limited preparation for complex peacekeeping environments and the fluid nature of the conflict. Described by Gberie

⁶ The UN's involvement in the Liberian civil war goes back to 1993 when the Security Council established the UN Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) to support ECOMOG in implementing the Cotonou Peace Agreement. The UN could only implement the revised Cotonou peace agreement in 1997 following years of failed implementation attempts due to ongoing conflict among Liberian factions. The UNOMIL mission was over with the establishment of a democratically elected government following the 1997 elections. In the post-election period, the UN established the UN Peace-building Support Office in Liberia (UNOL) in lieu of UNOMIL to facilitate post-conflict recovery efforts (Adibe, 1997, pp. 477–481).



(2003) as “an heroic failure,” the ECOMOG mission also encountered multiple challenges, including inadequate planning, limited logistical support, coordination problems among contributing states, questions over its impartiality due to personal ties among participating states and Nigerian dominance in decision-making processes, particularly from Francophone states (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 57; Adibe, 1997, pp. 482–485; Arthur, 2010, pp. 14–16; Olonisakin, 2000, Chapter 4). These challenges revealed the discrepancy between Nigeria’s hegemonic aspirations in the region and its practical constraints in conducting peacekeeping operations in complex environments.

Despite significant challenges, the Liberian intervention yielded several strategic benefits for Nigeria. First and foremost, by leading the ECOMOG mission, Nigeria established itself as the primary security provider in West Africa when or where international actors were reluctant or unable to take the lead and bear the associated cost and blood. Furthermore, the first major African-led peacekeeping operation on the continent created a practical framework and procedures, thus a precedent, for subsequent regional peacekeeping missions (Arthur, 2010). Considering all the challenges and benefits, the ECOMOG mission yielded mixed results for Nigeria, oscillating between hegemonic aspirations and resource constraints. This tension, furthermore, has remained a consistent feature of Nigeria’s peacekeeping strategy since the late 1980s.

ECOWAS Intervention in Sierra Leone (1997–2002)

The ECOWAS intervention in Sierra Leone exemplified the evolution of Nigeria’s regional peacekeeping strategy based on lessons from the Liberian civil war. Similar to Liberia, conflicts in Sierra Leone erupted in 1991 when Foday Sankoh’s Revolutionary United Front (RUF) forces, backed by Libya, Burkina Faso, and Charles Taylor’s NPFL yet commanding minimal local support, attacked Momoh’s regime and seized the diamond-rich southeast region. The reasons Taylor supported the RUF forces were to punish Freetown for its contributions to the ECOMOG mission in Liberia, to fragment the fragile ECOMOG coalition, to destabilize the whole region, and thus, to facilitate diamond exports from Sierra Leone to Liberia (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 54, 82–83). In 1992, Momoh’s regime was toppled by Valentine Strasser, an ex-ECOMOG army officer, who established the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), ultimately leading to ECOMOG’s mandate expansion to Sierra Leone. Four years later, Julius Bio’s palace coup brought Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, a former senior UN official, to power through the post-coup elections.⁷ Through Côte d'Ivoire’s mediation, despite allegations of RUF favoritism, the Abidjan Accord was signed in 1996, aiming to bring peace, stability, and economic development to Sierra Leone.⁸ The following year, however, Johnny Paul Koroma, a putschist in previous failed coups, led a military coup, establishing the Armed Forces Ruling Council

⁷ Prior to the 1996 palace coup, Brigadier-General Bio notified Nigerian President Abacha of his planned coup. Angered by Sierra Leone’s censure against Nigeria at the 1995 Commonwealth Summit, Abacha assured Bio that Nigerian forces stationed in Sierra Leone would not intervene. Following the successful coup, Bio formed close ties with Abacha. The same Nigerian forces, however, later played a significant role in thwarting several coup attempts against the democratically-elected Kabbah government (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 85).

⁸ Being perceived as the only moral guarantor of the Abidjan Accord alongside the UN, the OAU, and the Commonwealth, Côte d'Ivoire’s mediation effort reflected the historical subregional rivalry with Nigeria in West Africa, dating back to the late 1960s when Côte d'Ivoire provided military support to the secessionist Biafra during the Nigerian civil war (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 86).



(AFRC), which subsequently invited the RUF to form a coalition. Kabbah, rejecting his government's overthrow through military means, called for help from the international community (Arthur, 2010, pp. 8–9). Nigerian President Abacha, viewing Kabbah's appeal as an opportunity to mitigate his military regime's international isolation, initiated a regional plan to restore stability in Sierra Leone.

Through this Nigerian-led initiative, ECOWAS deployed ECOMOG II to Sierra Leone, where forces, alongside a small UN Observer Mission (UNOSIL), confronted the AFRC and RUF to reinstate Kabbah within a year (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 83–88; Obi, 2009, pp. 124–125).⁹ Reflecting its dominance, Nigeria contributed approximately 90% of ECOMOG troops in Sierra Leone (~12,000 soldiers) and consequently controlled most operational decisions, with Nigerian military leaders often resembled their role to the US position in NATO (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 91). Such a dominance demonstrated Nigeria's superior capabilities and resources relative to other regional actors, which simultaneously generated regional resentment while providing multilateral legitimacy for Nigerian hegemonic aspirations. As Adebajo succinctly puts it:

"[...] while Nigeria faced criticisms in its subregion for its military actions in Sierra Leone, many of its critics refused to contribute the troops that could have diversified the force and diluted Nigeria's preponderant strength. [...] It was sometimes easier for ECOWAS states and the wider international community to criticize from the sidelines and let Nigeria bear the financial and military burden, while doing nothing to lighten this weight" (2002a, pp. 89–90).

Unlike the Liberian case, multiple factors undermined an effective ECOWAS response in Sierra Leone, including the internal divisions within ECOWAS regarding crisis response strategies, limited capacity and resources of ECOMOG compared to the UN military observers, interference from neighboring states, deteriorating relations between Nigerian forces and Sierra Leonean citizens, and Nigerian domination of decision-making processes at the expense of other contributing states. These challenges made it clear that the Nigerian-led ECOWAS initiative would fail to defeat the AFRC and RUF forces quickly (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 90–92; Arthur, 2010, pp. 14–16; Obi, 2009, p. 125). Furthermore, following Olusegun Obasanjo's election as Nigerian President in 1999, Nigeria began to reassess the costs and benefits of ECOMOG interventions amid domestic economic and social problems. During his address to the 54th UN General Assembly in 1999, for instance, Obasanjo stated that "[f]or too long, the burden of preserving international peace and security in West Africa has been left almost entirely to a few states [...] Nigeria's continual burden in Sierra Leone is unacceptably draining Nigeria financially. For our economy to take off, this bleeding has to stop" (p. 6).

Despite ECOWAS initiatives to appease the AFRC-RUF coalition to reinstate stability in Sierra Leone following the gradual withdrawal of Nigerian forces from ECOMOG, the rebels continued to attack Freetown and took UNAMSIL peacekeepers hostage to gain more concessions. In response to increasing attacks, the international community,

⁹ Despite violating the UN security Council's arms embargo, three private security firms, namely Sandline International, Executive Outcomes, and International Alert, with connections to external actors (e.g., the UK, South Africa) and diamond-mining firms (e.g., Branch Energy) also supplied weapons to ECOMOG's ally, the *kamajor* militias, to reinstate the Kabbah regime (Adebajo, 2002a, Chapter 4).



particularly the former colonizer United Kingdom, deployed additional forces throughout the country to contain the instability and oversee the 2002 elections, which Kabbah won decisively (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 93–95). In 2003, the ECOMOG mission was gradually replaced by the United Nations Peacekeeping Mission to Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) as Obasanjo announced that Nigeria would reduce its contributions to ECOMOG missions in West Africa due to economic and social problems at home (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 97–100; Arthur, 2010, pp. 13–14; Obi, 2009, pp. 125–126). As an illustration, Nigerian forces were significantly reduced, with 8,500 soldiers withdrawn from Sierra Leone while the remaining 3,500 soldiers were rehatted as UNAMSIL peacekeepers (Obi, 2009, pp. 121–122). Nevertheless, Nigeria assisted in training 8,500 Sierra Leonean military officers at the Nigerian Defense Academy, complementing significant British training of the army and police, to promote long-term security-sector reform (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 102).

In brief, by an attempt to restore democracy in Sierra Leone through ECOMOG, Nigeria aimed to reach two primary goals. First, despite his own military seizure of power, General Abacha sought to overcome international isolation and sanctions against his military regime by restoring democracy in Sierra Leone as well as demonstrating Nigeria's indispensable peacekeeping role in West Africa, where the international community remained hesitant to intervene, invoking the mantra of "African solutions for African problems." Second, and more importantly, by assuming such a burdensome role in this volatile region, Nigeria aimed to assert its hegemonic aspirations, a position it had pursued since the establishment of ECOWAS in 1975 to counter French influence and formidable francophone states like Côte d'Ivoire (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 92). In essence, the Sierra Leone intervention served as a showcase of Nigeria's benevolent and cooperative hegemonic role in addressing West Africa's security issues, which could potentially alleviate regional suspicions of Nigeria's ultimate goals while simultaneously struggling with economic and social challenges at home.

UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur (2007-2020)

In comparison to ECOWAS interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Nigeria's participation in the UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur, Sudan between 2007 and 2020 demonstrates its engagement with continental peacekeeping while navigating the complex relationship between regional and global security mechanisms. The Darfur conflict erupted in 2003 when two rebel groups, namely the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), launched an insurgency against Omar al-Bashir's government, criticizing the systematic political and economic marginalization of African farmers and nomadic Arab tribes (e.g., Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa) through Arab militia forces like the *Janjaweed* along with the Popular Defense Force (PDF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) (Adebajo, 2011, p. 203; De Waal, 2007, pp. 1039–1040; El-Tom, 2011). The international community responded to the ongoing humanitarian crisis, including mass killings, village burnings, systematic rape, forced displacement, and famine, in an evolving fashion, beginning with the establishment of an African Union monitoring mission (AMIS) in 2004 on the basis of the Ndjamena Humanitarian Ceasefire Agreement that later evolved into a hybrid UN-AU mission (UNAMID) in 2007, concurrent with the 2009 arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for al-



Bashir on charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide (Flint & de Waal, 2008, Chapter 7; Kindiki, 2007, pp. 3–5; UNSC, 2005). Despite these international efforts toward peace and stability in Sudan, little progress occurred until 2020 when the Darfur Peace Agreement was reached,¹⁰ largely because of an inconsistent international response and dysfunctional Sudanese government (De Waal, 2007, pp. 1041–1043).

Once the shortcomings of the Ndjamena Agreement became clear, the African Union peacekeeping mission (AMIS) proved inadequate to restore stability in Darfur due to its constraints, and as Khartoum continued violating the UN Security Council's resolution (S/RES/1556 (2004); UNSC, 2004),¹¹ the international community, particularly Americans,¹² began advocating for a UN mission with a robust mandate and sufficient resources, which subsequently led to the deployment of UNAMID in 2007 without a comprehensive peace strategy in the areas of ceasefire, civilian protection, and disarmament (De Waal, 2007, pp. 1047–1049; Flint & de Waal, 2008, Chapter 7). From 2004 to 2006, seven rounds of peace talks were held in either Addis Ababa or Abuja, with Nigerian President Obasanjo chairing most of the AU meetings. Through these peace talks, the Darfur Peace Agreement began taking shape following the 2004 Ndjamena Ceasefire Agreement (Adebajo, 2011, p. 205). When both China and Russia, two of the five veto-wielding permanent members of the UN Security Council, agreed to deploy a hybrid force with an "African Character" (S/RES/1769 (2007); UNSC, 2007), meaning that core troops would come from the continent, al-Bashir reluctantly gave consent to the UN peacekeeping mission despite his earlier characterization of UNAMID as an imperial mission (Adebajo, 2011, pp. 207–211; Gelot, 2012, p. 9).

The UN-AU Hybrid Mission was mandated to oversee the implementation of the 2006 Abuja Peace Agreement and to protect civilians with a \$1.8 billion-a-year budget. As the peace force required an African character, there were serious suspicions in the international community about African states' capacity to undertake such a mission. Nevertheless, seven African countries alongside external actors such as Bangladesh, China, Thailand and Nepal, contributed forces to Darfur. Nigeria, along with Rwanda, for instance, deployed four battalions despite most deployed African forces lacking necessary equipment and logistical support, which hampered their ability to conduct effective military patrols and evacuation operations. Furthermore, most UNAMID patrols in the region were suspended due to kidnapping or shots fired against UN personnel (Adebajo, 2011, pp. 211–212, 215; Omorogbe, 2011, pp. 48–54).

¹⁰ The Darfur Peace Agreement represents three sequential peace agreements signed between various parties to the conflict, including the Sudanese government and rebel groups such as the SLA, the JEM, and the Liberation and Justice Movement (LJM). These agreements were concluded in different locations over a fourteen-year period: Abuja (2006), Doha (2011), and Juba (2020).

¹¹ One year later, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1593 (2005), referring the situation in Darfur to the ICC despite Sudan not being a party to the Rome Statute. Subsequently, the ICC issued an arrest warrant for Omar al-Bashir in 2009 on charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide (De Waal, 2007, pp. 1041–1043; Flint & de Waal, 2008, Chapter 7).

¹² Given the inaction of the Clinton administration regarding the Rwanda genocide in 1994, the US House of Representatives and Secretary of State Colin Powell hastily designated events in Darfur as "genocide" amid upcoming elections, contrary to UN findings and NGO assessments. In characterizing Khartoum's response to the insurgency as genocide, a grassroots movement called "Save Darfur!" played a significant role in mobilizing international attention to the humanitarian emergency (Adebajo, 2011, p. 203; Flint & de Waal, 2008, Chapter 7).



Despite these shortcomings and challenges, Nigeria continued to provide troops (~3,000), logistical support, and leadership as force commander to the UN-AU Hybrid Mission until its withdrawal in 2020. Compared to its interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Nigeria's willingness to shoulder such a burden, albeit relatively small, in Darfur reflects its continental leadership aspirations and institutional positioning, despite the existence of alternative troop contributions and the geographic distance from its traditional sphere of influence. Through the UN-AU partnership in Darfur, Nigeria sought to achieve multiple strategic objectives, namely demonstrating its commitment to continental security mechanisms, maintaining its influence within the evolving AU, and sharing the associated costs and blood with other actors through the UN. Such a balancing act demonstrates Nigeria's peacekeeping strategy whereby it simultaneously engages with regional (e.g., ECOWAS/ECOMOG, AU) and global institutions like the UN to advance strategic benefits for hegemonic aspirations while managing resource constraints and mitigating leadership suspicions through multilateralism. Furthermore, such a hybrid mission aligns with the "African solutions for African problems" principle, whereby UNAMID strengthens African security mechanisms by providing opportunities to access UN logistical, technical, and financial support for African states. In sum, Nigerian contribution to the UN-AU Hybrid Mission underscores its African leadership while showing the importance of international partnerships for effectiveness and, more importantly, legitimacy (Gelot, 2012, Introduction; Kindiki, 2007, Chapter 4).

Conclusion

Examining Nigeria's dual engagement strategy for regional power projection through peacekeeping missions in the ECOWAS, AU, and UN frameworks, this study contributes to the scholarly debate on regionalism, emerging powers, and peacekeeping by offering a more integrated analysis of how regional powers utilize multiple institutional frameworks to maximize influence while minimizing associated costs. Analyzing Nigeria's dual peacekeeping strategy across peace operations in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Darfur, Sudan, this research sheds light on strategic calculations that guide Nigeria's approach to regional security governance in Africa's increasingly complex institutional landscape, revealing tensions between hegemonic aspirations and leadership constraints in West Africa and beyond.

Nigeria's peacekeeping strategy represents a calculated approach to maximizing its influence across West Africa and the broader continent while managing resource limitations and leadership constraints, particularly in its Francophone-dominated immediate region. Through ECOWAS, Nigeria seeks to establish itself as West Africa's security guarantor while creating necessary institutional mechanisms to legitimize its regional hegemony. Through its engagement with the AU-UN Hybrid Mission in Darfur, Nigeria aims to project its continental influence while sharing costs and blood of peacekeeping with other contributing states. With such a dual engagement strategy in peacekeeping through regional and global institutional mechanisms, Nigeria is able to exercise leadership while mitigating resistance from neighboring states to its hegemonic aspirations. Recent events, nevertheless, demonstrate that Nigeria's hegemonic aspirations face unprecedented challenges, particularly when domestic security crises



limit its capacity to project power regionally, as evidenced by its inability to prevent the withdrawal of three founding ECOWAS members in 2024 despite deploying economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure.

The case studies provide significant information with regard to Nigeria's evolutionary peacekeeping strategy. The Liberian intervention primarily exemplifies Nigeria's role as a regional gendarme while highlighting its significant resource limitations and operational challenges. The Sierra Leone intervention, on the other hand, demonstrates how Nigeria refined its peacekeeping approach by developing more robust partnerships with international actors without compromising its regional leadership. Finally, the Darfur intervention illustrates Nigeria's selective engagement with continental mechanisms whereby it balances regional leadership aspirations with practical constraints of geographic distance and resource limitations. In sum, these three cases demonstrate both the potential and constraints of regional security mechanisms that shape Nigeria's peacekeeping strategy, necessitating a selective engagement in its commitments and institutional arrangements to share burdens with international partners. Last but not least, this study's theoretical implications extend beyond Nigeria, representing a significant adaptation strategy to limitations and constraints faced by emerging powers in the Global South.

References

- Adebajo, A. (2000). Nigeria: Africa's New Gendarme? *Security Dialogue*, 31(2), 185–199.
- Adebajo, A. (2002a). *Building Peace in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Adebajo, A. (2002b). *Liberia's Civil War: Nigeria, ECOMOG, and Regional Security in West Africa*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Adebajo, A. (2008). Hegemony on a Shoestring: Nigeria's Post-Cold War Foreign Policy. In A. Adebajo & A. R. Mustapha (Eds.), *Gulliver's Troubles: Nigeria's Foreign Policy After the Cold War* (pp. 1–37). University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Adebajo, A. (2011). *UN Peacekeeping in Africa: From the Suez Crisis to the Sudan Conflicts*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Adebajo, A., & Landsberg, C. (2003). South Africa and Nigeria as Regional Hegemons. In M. Baregu & C. Landsberg (Eds.), *From Cape to Congo: Southern Africa's Evolving Security Challenges* (pp. 171–203). Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Adibe, C. E. (1997). The Liberian Conflict and the ECOWAS-UN Partnership. *Third World Quarterly*, 18(3), 471–488.
- Aning, E. K. (2007). Investing in Peace and Security in Africa: The Case of ECOWAS. *Security & Development*, 4(3), 533–542.
- Arthur, P. (2010). ECOWAS and Regional Peacekeeping Integration in West Africa: Lessons for the Future. *Africa Today*, 57(2), 2–24.



- Bach, D. C. (2007). Nigeria's 'Manifest Destiny' in West Africa: Dominance Without Power. *Afrika Spectrum*, 42(2), 301–321.
- Bah, A. M. S. (2005). West Africa: From a Security Complex to a Security Community. *African Security Review*, 14(2), 77–83.
- Baregu, M., & Landsberg, C. (Eds.). (2003). *From Cape to Congo: Southern Africa's Evolving Security Challenges*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Barnett, M., & Finnemore, M. (2004). *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics*. Cornell University Press.
- Bellamy, A. J., & Williams, P. D. (2005). Who's Keeping the Peace?: Regionalization and Contemporary Peace Operations. *International Security*, 29(4), 157–195.
- Beswick, D. (2010). Peacekeeping, Regime Security and 'African Solutions to African Problems': Exploring Motivations for Rwanda's Involvement in Darfur. *Third World Quarterly*, 31(5), 739–754.
- Brosig, M. (2013). Introduction: The African Security Regime Complex—Exploring Converging Actors and Policies. *African Security*, 6(3–4), 171–190.
- Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2003). *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge University Press.
- De Coning, C. (2017). Peace Enforcement in Africa: Doctrinal Distinctions between the African Union and United Nations. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 38(1), 145–160.
- De Waal, A. (2007). Darfur and the Failure of the Responsibility to Protect. *International Affairs*, 83(6), 1039–1054.
- Deutsch, K. W. (1970). *Political Community at the International Level: Problems of Definition and Measurement*. Archon Books.
- ECOWAS. (1991, July 6). *Declaration of Political Principles of the Economic Community of West African States*. https://www.eods.eu/template/default/compendium/Part%206/028_Declaration_political_principles_ECOWAS.pdf
- ECOWAS. (1993, July 24). *Revised Treaty of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)*. <https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/ecowas/1993/en/63993?prevDestination=search&prevPath=/search?keywords=ECOWAS%2C+declaration+of+political+principles&order=desc&page=3&sort=score&result=result-63993-en>
- ECOWAS. (1999, December 10). *Economic Community of West African States Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security*. <https://amaniafrica-et.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Protocol-Relating-to-the-Mechanism-for-Conflict-Prevention-Management-Resolution-Peace-Keeping-and-Security-1999.pdf>
- ECOWAS. (2001, December 21). *Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance Supplementary to the Protocol relating to the Mechanism For Conflict Prevention,*



Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security.
<https://www.eisa.org/pdf/ecowas2001protocol.pdf>

El-Tom, A. O. (2011). *Darfur, JEM and the Khalil Ibrahim Story, with a Complete Copy of The Black Book: Imbalance of Power and Wealth in Sudan* (1st Edition). Red Sea Press.

Flint, J., & de Waal, A. (2008). *Darfur: A New History of a Long War* (Revised and Updated). Zed Books.

Franke, B. (2009). *Security Cooperation in Africa: A Reappraisal*. First Forum Press.

Gbenga, O., & Oluwatobi, A. (2025). ECOWAS and the Challenges of Regional Integration: An Assessment of Nigeria's Hegemonic Role. *International Journal of Political Science & International Relations*, 16(4), 1-12.

Gberie, L. (2003). ECOMOG: The Story of an Heroic Failure. *African Affairs*, 102(406), 147-154.

Gelot, L. (2012). *Legitimacy, Peace Operations and Global-Regional Security: The African Union-United Nations Partnership in Darfur*. Routledge.

International Crisis Group. (2024, December 11). *Restoring Nigeria's Leadership for Regional Peace and Security* (Africa Briefing No. 203).
<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/203-restoring-nigerias-leadership-regional-peace-and-security>

Iwilade, A., & Agbo, J. U. (2012). ECOWAS and the Regulation of Regional Peace and Security in West Africa. *Democracy and Security*, 8(4), 358-373.

Jaye, T. (2008). The Security Culture of the ECOWAS: Origins, Development and the Challenge of Child Trafficking. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 26(2), 151-168.

Kindiki, K. (2007). *Intervention to Protect Civilians in Darfur: Legal Dilemmas and Policy Imperatives* (131; ISS Monograph Series). Institute for Security Studies (ISS).

Nolte, D. (2010). How to Compare Regional Powers: Analytical Concepts and Research Topics. *Review of International Studies*, 36(4), 881-901.

OAU. (1963, May 25). *Charter of the Organization of African Unity*.
<https://www.refworld.org/legal/constinstr/oau/1963/en/20810>

OAU. (2000, July 1). *Constitutive Act of the African Union*. Organization of African Unity (OAU).
<https://www.refworld.org/legal/constinstr/oau/2000/en/63758?prevDestination=search&prevPath=/search?keywords=African+Union+Constitutive+Act&sort=score&order=desc&result=result-63758-en>

Obasanjo, O. (1999, September 23). *Nigeria, Africa, and the World in the Next Millennium*. The 54th Session of the UN General Assembly.

Obi, C. I. (2009). Economic Community of West African States on the Ground: Comparing Peacekeeping in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, and Côte D'Ivoire. *African Security*, 2(2-3), 119-135.



Olonisakin, F. (2000). *Reinventing Peacekeeping in Africa: Conceptual and Legal Issues in ECOMOG Operations*. Kluwer Law International.

Omorogbe, E. Y. (2011). Can the African Union Deliver Peace and Security? *Journal of Conflict & Security Law*, 16(1), 35–62.

Pedersen, T. (2002). Cooperative Hegemony: Power, Ideas and Institutions in Regional Integration. *Review of International Studies*, 28(4), 677–696.

Prys, M. (2010). Hegemony, Domination, Detachment: Differences in Regional Powerhood. *International Studies Review*, 12(4), 479–504.

Reno, W. (1998). *Warlord Politics and African States*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Söderbaum, F., & Tavares, R. (2009). Problematizing Regional Organizations in African Security. *African Security*, 2(2–3), 69–81.

Tardy, T., & Wyss, M. (2014). Introduction: Africa-The Peacekeeping Laboratory. In T. Tardy & M. Wyss (Eds.), *Peacekeeping in Africa: The Evolving Security Architecture*. Routledge.

Tieku, T. K. (2004). Explaining the Clash and Accommodation of Interests of Major Actors in the Creation of the African Union. *African Affairs*, 103(411), 249–267.

UNSC. (2004). *Resolution 1556: Imposed an arms embargo with immediate effect on all non-governmental entities and individuals, including the Janjaweed, operating in the states of North Darfur, South Darfur and West darfur, Sudan (30 July 2004)*. S/RES/1556 (2004). [https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/1556%20\(2004\)](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/1556%20(2004))

UNSC. (2005). *Resolution 1593: On referring the situation in Darfur since 1 July 2002 to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (31 March 2005)*. S/RES/1593 (2005). <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/CAC%20SRES%201769.pdf>

UNSC. (2007). *Resolution 1769: Created an African Union/UN hybrid peacekeeping mission in Darfur (UNAMID) (31 July 2007)*. S/RES/1769 (2007). <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/CAC%20SRES%201769.pdf>

Van der Lijn, J., & Avezov, X. (2015). *The Future Peace Operations Landscape: Voices from Stakeholders around the Globe* [Final Report of the New Geopolitics of Peace Operations Initiative]. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

Williams, P. D. (2008). Keeping the Peace in Africa: Why “African” Solutions Are Not Enough. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 22(3), 309–329.

TÜRKİYE'S ROLE IN SHAPING REGIONAL POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST THROUGH THE ORGANIZATION OF ISLAMIC COOPERATION (OIC) AND THE ASTANA PROCESS

YUSUF DİNÇEL

yusuf.dincel@pa.edu.tr

Assistant Professor at Turkish National Police Academy, Faculty of Homeland Security,
Department of International Relations (Turkey). ORCID: 0000-0002-2615-6025.

Abstract

Turkish foreign policy has repositioned itself at various times in response to global and regional developments, particularly in the Middle East. This study argues that Türkiye's diplomatic behaviour reflects a dual orientation: while it employs normative, multilateral, and soft power instruments within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), it adopts a more security-driven and pragmatic approach in the Astana Process. The central hypothesis is that these two cases, taken together, reveal Türkiye's evolution toward a multidimensional and multi-actor strategy that balances value-based diplomacy with hard power imperatives. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and comparative approach, relying on secondary sources, official documents, and statements by government officials to analyse Türkiye's roles, strategies, and limitations across both platforms. By linking the OIC and the Astana Process, this article not only highlights the contrast between institutional multilateralism and crisis diplomacy but also contributes to the Turkish foreign policy literature by demonstrating how Türkiye simultaneously pursues normative legitimacy and security imperatives in its regional engagements.

Keywords

Türkiye, Astana Process, Turkish Foreign Policy, OIC, Multidimensional Strategy.

Resumo

A política externa turca reposicionou-se em vários momentos em resposta aos desenvolvimentos globais e regionais, particularmente no Médio Oriente. Este estudo argumenta que o comportamento diplomático da Turquia reflete uma orientação dupla: enquanto emprega instrumentos normativos, multilaterais e de soft power dentro da Organização da Cooperação Islâmica (OCI), adota uma abordagem mais pragmática e orientada para a segurança no Processo de Astana. A hipótese central é que estes dois casos, considerados em conjunto, revelam a evolução da Turquia para uma estratégia multidimensional e multilateral que equilibra a diplomacia baseada em valores com os imperativos do hard power. Metodologicamente, o estudo adota uma abordagem qualitativa e comparativa, baseando-se em fontes secundárias, documentos oficiais e declarações de funcionários governamentais para analisar os papéis, estratégias e limitações da Turquia em ambas as plataformas. Ao ligar a OIC e o Processo de Astana, este artigo não só destaca o contraste entre o multilateralismo institucional e a diplomacia de crise, como também contribui para a literatura sobre a política externa turca, demonstrando como a Turquia



persegue simultaneamente a legitimidade normativa e os imperativos de segurança nos seus compromissos regionais.

Palavras-chave

Turquia, Processo de Astana, Política Externa Turca, OIC, Estratégia Multidimensional.

How to cite this article

Dinçel, Yusuf (2025). Türkiye's Role in Shaping Regional Politics in the Middle East Through the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Astana Process. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 230-247. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.12>

Article submitted on 26th May 2025 and accepted for publication on 22nd September 2025.





TÜRKİYE'S ROLE IN SHAPING REGIONAL POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST THROUGH THE ORGANIZATION OF ISLAMIC COOPERATION (OIC) AND THE ASTANA PROCESS

YUSUF DİNÇEL

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, Türkiye's foreign policy approach has begun to shift, moving away from its traditional Western-oriented trajectory toward a more active, multidimensional, and strategically grounded policy in the Middle East. Particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the deepening political instability across the region has compelled Türkiye to develop new policy instruments in the areas of security, economy, and diplomacy. In this context, Türkiye has sought to increase its regional influence through various institutional and political platforms, assuming a significant role in two major diplomatic processes: the OIC and the Astana Process. Existing studies have separately examined Türkiye's Middle East policy (Khan, 2015; Cornell, 2012), its role in multilateral Islamic institutions such as the OIC (İhsanoğlu, 1997; Koç, 2019; Kulaklıkaya, 2025), and its engagement in the Astana Process as part of Syrian crisis diplomacy (Abboud, 2021; Michiels & Kizilkaya, 2022). However, these analyses often treat the two mechanisms in isolation. Building on this literature, this article chooses the OIC and the Astana Process for in-depth examination not only because Türkiye has played visible and active roles in both, but also because they embody two distinct logics of diplomacy: while the OIC reflects institutionalised, multilateral, and norm-based cooperation, the Astana Process represents crisis diplomacy shaped by military realities on the ground. By bringing these two strands of scholarship together, the study demonstrates how Türkiye balances soft power and normative legitimacy in a multilateral framework with hard power and security imperatives in a conflict-driven process.

While the OIC is characterised by a structure grounded in religious, cultural, and multilateral diplomacy, the Astana Process represents a form of crisis diplomacy shaped by military and political realities on the ground. These two distinct frameworks embody different dimensions of Türkiye's multidirectional foreign policy vision. Accordingly, the primary rationale for examining the OIC and the Astana Process together in this study is to reveal how Türkiye simultaneously manages value-based approaches and security-driven interests, and what kind of foreign policy model it adopts in this context. In line with this, the central research question of this study is formulated as follows: "How has Türkiye's foreign policy approach differed between two distinct diplomatic platforms -the OIC and the Astana Process- and what objectives has this comparative engagement



revealed about the evolution of its regional strategy?" The hypothesis developed based on this question is that, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Türkiye's foreign policy demonstrates a dual orientation: while it emphasises normative, multilateral, and soft power tools within the OIC, it adopts a more security-driven and pragmatic approach in the Astana Process. Taken together, these cases reveal an evolution toward a multidimensional, multi-actor strategy that balances value-based diplomacy with hard power imperatives.

The study analyses Türkiye's diplomatic role, interests, instruments, and limitations in the aforementioned two processes from a qualitative perspective. Methodologically, it employs a comparative case study design, examining the OIC and the Astana Process as two distinct but complementary cases of Turkish foreign policy practice. The analysis is based on secondary sources, official documents, statements by government officials, academic literature, and international reports. Theoretically, the study draws on a combination of constructivist and realist perspectives: while constructivism helps explain Türkiye's use of normative and identity-based elements within the OIC, realism sheds light on the security-driven and interest-based calculations that shape its role in the Astana Process. By integrating these perspectives, the article develops a balanced framework that demonstrates how value-based and security-oriented logics coexist in Türkiye's foreign policy. This analysis aims to uncover the diplomatic, military, and humanitarian strategies that Türkiye has adopted both in institutional frameworks (such as multilateral organisations like the OIC) and in field-oriented crisis initiatives (such as the Astana Process).

Türkiye's Foreign Policy Approach in the Middle East

From a historical perspective, it is evident that Türkiye's foreign policy has long placed significant emphasis on its relations with the West. However, developments since the beginning of the 21st century indicate that Turkish foreign policy has increasingly sought to establish closer ties with Middle Eastern countries. The ongoing transformation within the international system has led Türkiye to concentrate more intensively on regional issues. In the past, Türkiye's policy toward the Middle East was shaped predominantly by security concerns and based on a principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of regional states. In recent years, however, Turkish foreign policy has adopted a more proactive stance on Middle Eastern affairs (Khan, 2015: 31). Developments in the Middle East have had a significant impact on Türkiye's policies, extending from security to economic spheres. The traditional non-interventionist approach that characterised Türkiye's foreign policy toward the Middle East became unsustainable in the early 2000s due to changing regional dynamics. Within this framework, Türkiye began to shift its focus toward regional issues and strengthen its relations with neighbouring countries as a means of protecting its national interests and addressing both internal and external challenges. The reflection of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East has thus been shaped by objectives such as maintaining regional stability and enhancing economic cooperation (Arı and Piringçi, 2010: 3).

Following the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, Türkiye's role in the Arab world underwent a significant transformation. In this context, Türkiye



launched numerous political initiatives with neighbouring Arab states and signed a series of agreements aimed at enhancing mutual cultural engagement. During this period, Türkiye began to pursue a more active policy within the OIC and gained permanent observer status in the Arab League, allowing it to participate in various activities under its framework (Ennis and Momani, 2013: 1128). As of January 2009, it became evident that the AKP's foreign policy orientation was no longer solely focused on strengthening ties with Western countries or pursuing European Union (EU) membership. Instead, increasing emphasis was placed on Türkiye's policies toward the Middle East (Özdemir, 2010: 274). After the AKP's success in the 2011 general election, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said in his victory speech that cities such as Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, Amman, Cairo, Sarajevo, Baku, and Nicosia were all "friendly and brotherly" towards Türkiye. He went on to emphasize that Türkiye would pursue an active foreign policy in regions including, but not limited to, the Middle East, the Balkans, and the Caucasus (Cornell, 2012: 13). In this framework, it was clearly stated that Türkiye sought to assume a more active role in foreign affairs and to strengthen cooperation with both its immediate and more distant neighbors.

The United States (U.S.) activities in the Middle East in 2004 under the rhetoric of freedom caused concern among the region's populations. The U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan revealed that the discourse of freedom did not align with the realities on the ground. In this context, regimes in the Middle East adopted increasingly repressive and authoritarian governance models in response to unfolding events. At the beginning of 2011, uprisings that started in Tunisia and Egypt, driven by demands for democratisation and reform, spread to other Arab countries and triggered developments that would have long-term consequences. During this period, the U.S. asserted that Arab states, in order to successfully implement reform and transformation processes, should follow the practices of a "model" country. Tunisia's opposition leader Rached Ghannouchi emphasised that Türkiye could serve as a model state in terms of political transformation and reform in the Arab world (Kirişçi, 2011: 33-34).

These uprisings in the Middle East came to be known as the "Arab Spring" and were particularly notable for being internally driven movements. The widespread use of social media during the uprisings enabled Arab youth and the disadvantaged middle classes to adopt a political stance and take collective action. Factors such as the global economic crisis, rising food prices, and unjust governance were key contributors to the emergence of the Arab Spring. The fact that the uprisings began in Tunisia and were soon followed by the collapse of authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Yemen, and Libya generated a wave of optimism across other Arab nations. In an environment characterised by profound uncertainty surrounding the future direction of political developments in the region, the question of Türkiye's new foreign policy vision became critical, particularly given its recent adoption of a "zero problems with neighbours" (Coşkun, 2015: 187) approach.

Notably, Turkish-Syrian relations, which had remained strained throughout the 1990s, improved significantly in the early 2000s during the tenure of the AKP government. The increasing trade volume between the two countries and the facilitation of visa procedures significantly contributed to the development of positive bilateral relations. However, the uprisings in Syria during the Arab Spring posed serious challenges to Turkish foreign policy. In the initial phase, Türkiye emphasised that the Assad regime should undertake



reforms. During this period, Türkiye maintained open channels of communication with Syria. Nevertheless, the Assad regime escalated its repressive and authoritarian practices in an effort to suppress domestic opposition groups. Following this development, relations between Türkiye and Syria deteriorated significantly (Öniş, 2012: 47-55; Dalacoura, 2012: 77). Before the Arab Spring, it was widely recognised that Türkiye had been trying to develop closer ties with Arab countries. As a result of its active foreign policy in political and economic spheres, Türkiye's popularity in the region has increased considerably. However, during the Arab Spring process, Türkiye faced significant difficulties in maintaining its previously strong relations with neighbouring states.

Beginning in the 2000s, Türkiye developed a foreign policy approach grounded in soft power, placing greater emphasis on diplomatic negotiations rather than military instruments. Before the Arab Spring, Türkiye had good relations with countries like Syria, Egypt and Libya. During this period, Türkiye aimed to strengthen its ties with Arab states by leveraging mutual economic interdependence. Within this framework, Türkiye signed free trade agreements with several Levant countries, including Syria. As can be observed, the majority of these relations were based on bilateral trade, and Türkiye's political stance following the uprisings had the potential to endanger its economic interests in the region. However, adopting a policy that ignored popular uprisings and supported existing regimes would have significantly undermined Türkiye's aspiration to play a regional leadership role. Faced with such a dilemma, Türkiye ultimately chose to stand by the protesting Arab populations. In doing so, the "Turkish model" emerged as an alternative to the prevailing political authoritarianism and rent-based economic structures dominant in the Middle East (Öniş, 2014: 207-208; Ennis and Momani, 2013: 1129-1130). Between 2002 and 2011, the AKP's Middle East policy was shaped around Ahmet Davutoğlu's principle of "zero problems with neighbours," with a strong emphasis on fostering economic interdependence. During this period, Türkiye maintained close relations with countries in the region. However, the country remained cautious regarding the idea of presenting itself as a model for other states in the region. In this context, Davutoğlu made a clear statement in 2004, declaring that Türkiye did not aspire to serve as a model for anyone. Despite this, the term "Turkish model" continues to be employed in the literature when analysing Türkiye's Middle East policy (D'Alema, 2024: 815).

In the Turkish model, economic gains were prioritized over ideological motives (Göksel, 2018: 44). During the period of the Arab Spring in the Middle East, Türkiye's vibrant economy was perceived by Arab societies as a model worthy of emulation (Bengio, 2012: 59). However, considering the structural rigidity of the state-centric economies prevalent in Arab countries, it was argued that replicating Türkiye's developmental trajectory would be difficult for the Arab world (Dede, 2011: 30). Before the Arab Spring, Türkiye had assumed the role of mediator in resolving regional conflicts such as those between Israel and Syria, Israel and Hamas, Syria and Iraq, and even between the U.S. and Iran. However, following the escalation of civil wars in Syria and Libya, Türkiye came to the realisation that it was insufficient in terms of halting regional conflicts (Ehteshami and Elik, 2011: 646-655). In the pre-Arab Spring period, Türkiye had established close ties with Arab countries by prioritising economic cooperation and engaging in active mediation efforts.



However, following the outbreak of the Arab Spring in the Middle East, the new conjuncture that emerged brought about changes in Turkish foreign policy. While struggling with this new reality, Türkiye adopted a security-oriented foreign policy approach. Particularly after 2016, Türkiye's national security came under threat due to regional crises. In Libya, Türkiye supported the Government of National Accord against Haftar's forces, while during the developments following the economic embargo imposed on Qatar, Türkiye sided with the Qatari government against Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the ousting of the legitimately elected Mohamed Morsi government in Egypt through Sisi's coup in 2013, followed by Sisi's rise to power, combined with Türkiye's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, led to the deterioration of relations between Türkiye and Egypt. In this context, in November 2013, Egypt expelled Türkiye's ambassador in Cairo, and, in line with the principle of reciprocity, Türkiye declared the Egyptian ambassador persona non grata. Following these developments between Egypt and Türkiye, relations between Türkiye and the United Arab Emirates, which supported Sisi, also deteriorated. Although relations between Türkiye and Israel had been strained due to the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010, diplomatic ties were restored in 2016. However, following the U.S. decision to relocate its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and the Israeli army's brutal response to Palestinian protests, Türkiye withdrew its ambassador from Israel in 2018. Türkiye's process of diplomatic isolation in the Middle East accelerated as disputes with regional countries over the Eastern Mediterranean deepened, leading to Türkiye's gradual exclusion from regional cooperation initiatives (Yönten and Denemark, 2023: 834-835). This trajectory indicates that Türkiye's foreign policy has, to a considerable extent, been shaped by immediate security concerns and responses to regional crises, which at times limited the scope for pursuing long-term cooperative frameworks. As a result, Ankara faced certain constraints in its diplomatic manoeuvrability and in building multilateral partnerships, which contributed to perceptions of Türkiye as relying more on short-term reactive strategies rather than consistently proactive ones.

This transformation is not only a historical background but also reveals the causal mechanisms that explain Türkiye's differentiated strategies across the OIC and the Astana Process. While the pre-Arab Spring era enabled Türkiye to rely on economic interdependence and soft power tools, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and the subsequent rise of security threats -ranging from refugee flows to the activities of PKK/PYD-affiliated groups- pushed Ankara toward a security-oriented and militarised foreign policy. These dual pressures account for why Türkiye emphasises normative legitimacy and multilateral cooperation in the OIC, whereas in the Astana Process it privileges hard power and pragmatic crisis management. In this way, the historical trajectory outlined above directly connects to the central hypothesis of this article: Türkiye's foreign policy demonstrates a dual orientation, combining value-based diplomacy with security-driven imperatives.

The OIC and Türkiye's Role

The OIC was established under the name of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference on 25 September 1969, in Rabat, Morocco, following the arson attack on the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem on 21 August 1969. The OIC currently has 57 member states, the



majority of which are Muslim-majority countries. However, several countries, such as Uganda, Benin, Mozambique, Suriname, and Côte d'Ivoire, where Muslims do not form the majority, are also members of the organisation. In addition, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Central African Republic, the Russian Federation, and Thailand hold observer status within the OIC.

According to Joshua S. Goldstein, the use of geography by a state as a power element indicates the concept of geopolitics. Amstutz, on the other hand, argues that the geopolitical factor arises from the relationship between geography, national power, and foreign policy. As a result, geographical location is a fundamental factor in determining the international role of a state or alliance. In this context, an examination of the geographic locations of the OIC member states reveals that they occupy significant geostrategic positions. The OIC represents approximately 2 billion Muslims worldwide and includes member states that host strategic waterways such as the Dardanelles, the Strait of Malacca, the Bab el-Mandeb, the Suez Canal, and the Strait of Hormuz. Furthermore, many member states possess sovereignty over hydrocarbon energy resources as well as other key energy sources (Hossain, 2012: 293-294; Hashmat, 2011: 110).

The aims and principles of the OIC are set out in detail in Article 1 of its founding charter, which emphasizes the strengthening of bonds of brotherhood and cooperation among states, the establishment of peaceful and just interstate relations in line with the principle of good neighbourliness, the recognition of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination and support for the establishment of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, as well as the creation of an Islamic common market with the goal of enhancing the collective economic power of Muslim countries (Charter of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, 1974: 4-5). The OIC has actively pursued diplomatic and political efforts on various platforms to support the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. In this context, it has encouraged cooperation among its member states (Kulaklıkaya, 2025: 40).

The announcement by U.S. President Donald Trump on 6 December 2017, recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, sparked strong reactions across the Muslim world. During this period, Türkiye assumed a leading role by bringing the issue of Jerusalem to the agenda of the OIC, the EU, and global public opinion. Thanks to these efforts, the OIC member states collectively issued strong responses, and the decision was debated at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. At Türkiye's request, the OIC convened an extraordinary summit in Istanbul on 13 December 2017, attended by leaders, foreign ministers, or high-level representatives from all member countries. During this summit, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared that Jerusalem is a red line for Muslims. The final communiqué of the summit condemned the U.S. decision to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and emphasised that Israel is an occupying power in the region (Kireççi, 2018: 67-71).

The OIC is a prominent organisation within the international community and has pursued an active policy as a mediator in resolving conflicts in the Muslim world since its establishment. Although it has achieved success in ending certain conflicts, its efforts have often failed to produce desired results. Since its foundation, the OIC has taken



decisions on almost every issue affecting the Muslim world with the aim of alleviating the region's troubles. However, the organisation has faced significant challenges in implementing these decisions. For instance, the Kashmir conflict, which has remained a major issue between India and Pakistan for decades, has been addressed by the OIC. A special working committee was established within the organisation to deal with this issue. Nevertheless, the desired outcome was not achieved. Similarly, during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the OIC attempted to act as a mediator and bring the two countries to the negotiating table, but these efforts were ultimately unsuccessful. The OIC has also provided financial assistance to the persecuted Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and directly engaged with the Myanmar government to address their grievances. Following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the U.S., Muslims living in Western countries faced a growing threat of Islamophobia. In this period, Muslims were frequently blamed for acts of terrorism. In response, the OIC began actively combating Islamophobia in Western countries and advocating for the rights of its victims. Additionally, through official channels, the organisation has launched initiatives to counter disinformation campaigns targeting Islam and Muslims under the guise of Islamophobia (Ali and Sultan, 2023: 1-2).

While labelling the OIC as an ineffective international organisation would be an unfair criticism, it can be argued that it has fallen short in conducting Islamic policies in a collective manner (Sheikh, 2017: 120). Often referred to as the "UN of Islamic countries," the OIC, as seen above, unfortunately shares the same fate as the UN when it comes to preventing international conflicts. In the case of the UN, the Security Council's veto power is cited as a major obstacle to resolving global issues; in the OIC's case, however, the absence of such a mechanism also hampers effectiveness, albeit for different reasons. Since all member states have equal voting rights and decisions are generally taken by consensus, the organisation struggles to adopt binding and enforceable resolutions. This consensus-based system often dilutes decisions to the lowest common denominator, preventing the OIC from taking strong collective action in times of crisis. Moreover, many OIC member states face not only border disputes but also ethnic and sectarian conflicts. As a result, some OIC countries perceive each other as threats and seek alliances with external powers outside the framework of the organisation (Birdiřli and Atawula, 2019: 98-99).

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and Türkiye's subsequent recognition of it negatively affected relations between Türkiye and the Arab countries in the Middle East. However, following the emergence of the Cyprus issue, Türkiye sought to revise its Middle East policy to avoid becoming isolated in the UN. During the conflicts between Arabs and Israel, Türkiye pursued a policy of balance. In 1969, after the arson attack on Al-Aqsa Mosque, Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel stated that the Turkish people were deeply saddened by the tragic incident and that Türkiye would support the other Muslim states. Türkiye was represented at the first OIC summit meeting by Foreign Minister İhsan Sabri Çağlayangil.

In the early years of the OIC, Türkiye adopted a cautious approach in its participation due to its relations with Western allies (İhsanoğlu, 1997: 101-102). However, between 1976 and 1990, Türkiye's trade volume with Islamic countries increased significantly. After the end of the Cold War, Türkiye adopted a more active policy toward the Muslim



world, and in this context, its activities within the OIC expanded. Türkiye used the OIC platform to bring attention to the rights of Turkish minorities living in Cyprus, Greece, and Bulgaria, as well as the challenges faced by Muslims in Bosnia. Moreover, Türkiye played a leading role in the accession of Muslim states in Central Asia to the OIC. Türkiye plays an active role in the educational and cultural commissions within the OIC. In addition, it became a member of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISESCO), affiliated with the OIC, in 2017. Following the election of Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu as Secretary-General in 2005, Türkiye made significant contributions to the development of new principles for the OIC (Koç, 2019: 274-275; Ataman, 2009: 49). Strengthening cooperation with Islamic countries is one of Türkiye's key foreign policy priorities. The OIC is regarded as an important international body for promoting regional development. It also holds considerable potential for economic growth (Fidan, 2023: 21). As can be seen, the global uncertainties that followed the end of the Cold War led Türkiye to establish closer ties with the OIC (Aykan, 1993: 129). From the 2000s onward, relations between Türkiye and the OIC have significantly improved. Türkiye's active mediating roles in the cases of Afghanistan, Libya, and the Rohingya issue demonstrate its commitment to promoting peace in the Muslim world. Türkiye has provided aid to Rohingya Muslim refugees who were forced to flee persecution in Myanmar. In this context, Türkiye and the OIC have carried out joint initiatives to defend the rights of Rohingya Muslims on international platforms. Through institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) and the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), Türkiye has participated in multi-stakeholder cooperation models with the OIC (Kulaklıkaya, 2025: 48-50).

These initiatives highlight that Türkiye's role within the OIC goes beyond symbolic participation and has, at times, translated into agenda-setting power. For example, Türkiye's leadership during the extraordinary summit on Jerusalem in December 2017 mobilised a broad consensus against the U.S. decision to recognise the city as Israel's capital, demonstrating Ankara's ability to rally member states around its position. Similarly, Türkiye's humanitarian diplomacy regarding the Rohingya crisis has increased its moral authority within the organisation, even though structural limitations of the OIC often constrain collective action. Taken together, such cases reveal that Türkiye's effectiveness within the OIC is not uniform but issue-specific: it is more influential when combining normative legitimacy with practical humanitarian initiatives, which supports the article's central hypothesis regarding the coexistence of value-based diplomacy and pragmatic foreign policy objectives.

At this point, it is useful to evaluate TİKA's humanitarian activities in Africa and Türkiye's broader Africa initiative. TİKA, the institution responsible for coordinating Türkiye's foreign aid, began its operations on the continent by opening a coordination office in Ethiopia in 2005. Despite being a relatively new actor in Africa, TİKA has carried out extensive aid programs in the region. These activities are conducted with a human-centred approach and are tailored to the needs and priorities of partner countries. For instance, the hospitals built in Sudan and Somalia are jointly administered by personnel from the Turkish Ministry of Health and local partners, with the aim of providing rapid and on-site solutions to emerging problems (Arpa and Bayar, 2022: 6-8).



In 2005, Türkiye launched a new foreign policy approach toward Africa, declaring that year as the "Year of Africa." In previous decades, Türkiye had largely neglected the continent, and its relations with African states remained unstable. Earlier periods of engagement were mostly shaped by short-term objectives such as easing international isolation or securing diplomatic support from certain African countries. However, in the early 2000s, the AKP government, bolstered by the support of conservative business circles, began to pursue substantive economic policies to strengthen ties with African states. In doing so, Türkiye gradually incorporated soft power instruments into its Africa policy. Within this framework, humanitarian aid, religious and cultural activities, scholarships, and commercial relations elevated Türkiye's standing on the continent (Tepeciklioğlu, Vreÿ & Baser, 2024: 289-290).

Following the declaration of 2005 as the "Year of Africa," the First Türkiye-Africa Partnership Summit was held in Istanbul on 18-21 August 2008, after which the African Union recognised Türkiye as a strategic partner (Öztürk and Duman, 2023: 224). Parallel to the deepening of Türkiye-Africa relations, numerous diplomatic missions were opened, and bilateral trade volumes steadily increased. For example, Türkiye's major investments in Ethiopia have provided employment opportunities for thousands of Ethiopians. Furthermore, Türkiye's launch of post-conflict development programs in countries such as Sudan and Somalia, along with the active engagement of Turkish-origin aid associations, stand out as significant developments that resonate with then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's statement: "*Africa belongs to Africans; we are not here for your gold*" (Süsler and Alden, 2022: 598).

By emphasising its cultural and religious elements, as well as its technological capabilities, Türkiye can further strengthen its economic relations with Islamic countries. Additionally, leveraging its advantageous geopolitical position, Türkiye should enhance its role as a strategic energy bridge between energy-exporting countries in the East and energy-importing countries in the West. Moreover, cooperation between Türkiye and OIC member states should be increased in areas such as trade, education, science, finance, and technology (Bağış and Yurtseven, 2017: 64-69). By prioritising cooperation with OIC countries, Türkiye can play a vital role among regional states.

Astana Process and Türkiye's Crisis Diplomacy

Following the outbreak of a civilian uprising in Syria in March 2011, triggered by the Arab Spring and subsequently turning into an internal conflict, the Geneva Process -initiated under the leadership of the UN- aimed to end the hostilities and re-establish peace in the region, but ultimately failed. The intensification of the conflict led to humanitarian crises, and the armed struggle between the Syrian regime and the opposition rendered diplomacy ineffective, resulting in a military stalemate. Due to its access to the Mediterranean, Syria held strategic importance for Russia as a key ally. By 2015, in response to the possibility of U.S. intervention in the region and the growing military strength of the opposition, Russia launched a large-scale military intervention in Syria in September 2015. As a result of this intervention, the military capacity of the opposition was significantly weakened. Subsequently, political negotiations to address the conflict in Syria were initiated in January 2017 in Kazakhstan, under the leadership of Russia,



Iran, and Türkiye. This initiative came to be known in the international community as the "Astana Process." At this point, the Geneva Process was not entirely sidelined but continued in parallel with the Astana Process. The UN attempted to end the conflict through a power-sharing negotiation model between the warring parties, but this effort failed, as both sides entered the process with the goal of achieving a decisive victory (Abboud, 2021: 326-332; Vogel, 2023: 85). Since the beginning of the uprisings in Syria, Türkiye had adopted a foreign policy aimed at the overthrow of the Assad regime. On the other hand, actors like Iran and Russia provided both military and political support to ensure the unwavering continuation of the Syrian regime. Russia supported the progression of the process without regime change or international intervention, favouring negotiated settlements (Nabiev and Nafikov, 2021: 208).

While Türkiye opposed the Assad regime, the activities of PKK/PYD-affiliated groups along the Syrian border posed a serious threat to Türkiye's national security. In response to attacks by the PKK/PYD, Türkiye carried out military operations in northern Syria. During this period, Türkiye also continued its diplomatic efforts as a politically influential actor within the Astana Process (Philips, 2022: 375). Throughout the Astana Process, the guarantor states established four different "de-escalation zones" in Syria. The first zone included the city of Idlib, the northeastern part of Latakia, the western areas of Aleppo, and the northern settlements in Hama. The second zone consisted of the Rastan and Talbiseh areas north of the city of Homs. The third zone referred to Eastern Ghouta, located north of Damascus. Finally, the fourth zone covered the southern areas along the Jordanian border, including the cities of Daraa and Quneitra. Initially, there was a noticeable decrease in violence in these designated zones (Talukdar and Anas, 2018). However, in 2018 and 2019, the Syrian regime resumed hostilities in these regions, undermining the de-escalation efforts. As a result of the regime's actions, millions of Syrian refugees fled toward the Turkish border. In the face of these developments, both the Moscow and Tehran administrations continued to provide all forms of support to the Assad regime (Mohamad, 2023). Within this context, Türkiye played a significant role in ensuring border security and managing the humanitarian burden. Violations committed by the regime in the de-escalation zones further complicated Türkiye's military and diplomatic policy toward the region. Moreover, through its role as a guarantor in the Astana Process, Türkiye continued its efforts not only as a military actor but also as a diplomatic player in the search for a resolution.

Türkiye opposed the de facto situation that the PKK/PYD was attempting to establish in Syria. In this context, the negotiations in Astana intensified (Michiels and Kizilkaya, 2022: 17). Moreover, Russia refused to recognise the PKK/PYD as a terrorist organisation, and the relations between Russia and the PKK/PYD continued within this framework. However, this relationship appeared to come to an end when Türkiye captured Afrin in January 2018. Additionally, although forces affiliated with the Syrian regime attempted to enter Afrin in February 2018, they were repelled by Turkish artillery following an agreement reached with Iranian and Russian officials (Hale, 2019: 31-32). Iran had successfully established a presence in the Syrian army and other security structures through its militias. After achieving military success, Iran shifted its focus to economic and socio-cultural issues (Vogel, 2023: 81). In the Astana talks, since Russian, Turkish, and Iranian forces were present on the ground in Syria, they had the capacity to limit



the use of force by the conflicting parties (Michiels and Kizilkaya, 2022: 3). While Türkiye, Iran, and Russia carried out military interventions in Syria, they also conducted diplomatic negotiations as guarantor states. While Russia and Iran sought to gain military and political advantages in the region, Türkiye acted with the aim of neutralising elements that posed a threat to its national security.

Unlike Iran and Russia, Türkiye was more affected economically and in terms of security by the conflicts in Syria due to both the influx of refugees and the terrorist attacks carried out by the PKK/PYD. As seen, one of the main reasons for Türkiye's involvement in the Astana Process was to protect its national security and minimise the negative material impacts caused by the conflict in Syria. Türkiye's initial approach to the political crisis in Syria was shaped around the overthrow of Assad. However, the Astana talks revealed that Türkiye's priorities were to emphasise humanitarian issues, resolve the refugee problem, and bring an end to violence as soon as possible. While Russia fought politically to keep the regime in power during the Astana talks, Türkiye acted as a guarantor for the participation of opposition groups in the negotiations. Iran, on the other hand, was to assume a mediator role if the talks were interrupted. Thanks to the Astana talks, the conflicting parties in Syria came to the negotiation table. At this point, all parties made significant contributions to the process (Cengiz, 2020: 10-11). Thanks to this process, Türkiye was able to intervene directly in developments that threatened its border security, while maintaining its military presence on the ground within the framework of international legitimacy.

Since Türkiye's first intervention into Syrian territory in August 2016, it has been included in the Astana Process because it was responsible for the political and military organisation of the Syrian opposition. Türkiye's presence at the negotiation table in Astana was welcomed by both the Syrian regime and various opposition groups involved in the process. These groups included Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam. The guarantor states did not consider including DEASH or al-Nusra in the Astana Process a topic for discussion. However, the situation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which has close ties with al-Nusra, was critical. At this point, Türkiye took on the responsibility of reducing the influence of radical elements within HTS who did not want to participate in the Astana talks. The positive aspect of Astana was that three countries with different objectives in Syria came together at the negotiation table. The Astana Process has shown that mediation efforts, even if not entirely successful, can lead to positive outcomes (Michiels and Kizilkaya, 2022: 17-29). In this context, the most striking feature of the Astana talks is that actors on different fronts in the conflict zone were able to find common ground through diplomatic channels. Türkiye's influence over the Syrian opposition increased Ankara's role on the Astana platform.

This development illustrates Türkiye's shift toward a more flexible and context-specific foreign policy. In contrast to its participation in the OIC -where Ankara sought to build legitimacy through multilateral diplomacy, symbolic leadership, and humanitarian initiatives- its involvement in the Astana Process was shaped by urgent security imperatives, such as border protection, refugee management, and direct military engagement. The difference between these two platforms demonstrates that Türkiye no longer relies solely on normative and cooperative instruments but rather pursues a dual-



track strategy in which value-based diplomacy coexists with pragmatic, security-oriented action.

Comparative Analysis: Türkiye's Engagement in the OIC and the Astana Process

A direct comparison of Türkiye's involvement in the OIC and the Astana Process allows for a clearer evaluation of the central argument. Within the OIC, Ankara's influence became evident during critical turning points such as the extraordinary summit on Jerusalem in December 2017, when it succeeded in rallying member states against Washington's recognition of the city as Israel's capital. Türkiye's humanitarian engagement in the Rohingya issue likewise enhanced its credibility and normative standing, illustrating how Ankara leveraged soft power, coalition-building, and symbolic authority in multilateral settings.

By contrast, Türkiye's involvement in the Astana Process was largely driven by urgent security concerns, primarily the proximity of PKK/PYD groups to its border and the significant influx of refugees from Syria. Rather than relying on consensus politics, Ankara asserted its position through its military deployments, its capacity to shape the stance of Syrian opposition groups, and its tactical bargaining with Russia and Iran. In this arena, diplomacy was more transactional and directly tied to hard power instruments.

Viewed together, the two cases underscore both convergence and divergence. In both contexts, Türkiye aimed to portray itself as an indispensable regional actor: in the OIC through normative advocacy and humanitarian diplomacy, and in Astana through security-oriented negotiations and on-the-ground involvement. The key distinction lies in the nature of the tools and outcomes: while participation in the OIC bolstered Türkiye's international legitimacy and visibility, involvement in Astana produced more concrete security advantages and strategic leverage in the Syrian conflict. This comparison substantiates the article's central claim that Türkiye's foreign policy blends value-based approaches with pragmatic, security-driven strategies, adapting its instruments to the institutional framework at hand.

Conclusion

The political transformations in the Middle East over the past twenty years have led to significant changes in Türkiye's foreign policy stance, and during this process, Türkiye has taken serious steps toward becoming a more active and multifaceted regional actor. In this context, Türkiye's roles in the OIC and the Astana Process reflect the country's effort to simultaneously manage both its diplomatic priorities and security concerns. By employing a comparative case study method, this article has demonstrated how Türkiye adapts its strategies to two distinct diplomatic frameworks -one grounded in institutionalised multilateralism and the other in crisis diplomacy- thus providing analytical leverage for testing the central hypothesis.

Within the OIC, Türkiye pursues a multilateral foreign policy based on normative values, aiming at cultural and political rapprochement in the Muslim world. Concrete cases such



as the extraordinary summit on Jerusalem in 2017 and Türkiye's leadership on the Rohingya issue illustrate its capacity to set the agenda and enhance its normative legitimacy. At the same time, the consensus-based decision-making procedures and lack of enforcement mechanisms within the OIC -documented in the literature as recurring institutional limitations- have restricted the degree to which Türkiye's initiatives could translate into binding outcomes. Nevertheless, Türkiye's leadership in symbolic and humanitarian issues has increased its visibility and moral authority within the OIC.

In contrast, the Astana Process is significant as it demonstrates Türkiye's development of a more concrete and security-centred diplomatic approach that also involves hard power elements. During this process, Türkiye has become a decisive actor thanks to both its military presence on the ground and its influence over Syrian opposition groups. Additionally, Türkiye has effectively used the Astana platform to address national security priorities such as neutralising threats along its Syrian border and controlling refugee flows.

The comparative analysis highlights that Türkiye's impact varies depending on the issue and setting: within the OIC, its effectiveness stems from blending normative leadership with humanitarian engagement, whereas in the Astana framework, it derives influence through direct security involvement and tactical bargaining. This supports the argument that Türkiye's foreign policy follows a dual-track orientation rather than a single, uniform approach.

In conclusion, Türkiye's position in the OIC and Astana platforms confirms the hypothesis of a dual orientation in its foreign policy: while pursuing normative, multilateral, and soft power tools in the OIC, Türkiye simultaneously adopts a more security-driven and pragmatic stance in the Astana Process. Taken together, these findings validate the comparative framework of this study and highlight that Türkiye's evolution toward a multidimensional and multi-actor strategy can only be fully understood by analysing both its normative ambitions and its security imperatives within distinct institutional settings.

References

- Abboud, S. (2021). Making peace to sustain war: the Astana Process and Syria's illiberal peace. *Peacebuilding*, 9 (3), 326-343. doi: 10.1080/21647259.2021.1895609
- Ali, T., & Sultan, H. (2023). Emerging role of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in global governance since 1969. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 10 (1), 1-18. doi: 10.1080/23311983.2023.2202052
- Arı, T., & Piringçi, F. (2010). Turkey's New Foreign Policy Towards The Middle East And The Perceptions In Syria And Lebanon. *Gazi Akademik Bakış*, 4 (7), 1-16. Available at: <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/gav/issue/6524/86496>
- Arpa, E., & Bayar, M. (2022). Türk Dış Yardım Modeli: Afrika Örneği. *Bölge Çalışmaları Dergisi*, 1 (2): 1-17. Available at: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/ajas/issue/74560/1226729>



Ataman, M. (2009). Interdependence and Diversification: A New Framework for Turkish Foreign Policy. *Bilgi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, (1), 38-57. Available at: <https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/bilgi%20v11i1/index.html>

Aykan, M. B. (1993). Turkey and the OIC: 1984-1992. *The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations*, (23), 101-131. doi: 10.1501/Intrel_0000000179

Bağış, B., & Yurtseven, Ç. (2017). Turkey and the OIC: Greater Economic Cooperation, Opportunities and Challenges. *Centre for Strategic Research (SAM)*, No: 13. Available at: <https://www.sam.gov.tr/en/papers/turkey-and-the-oic-greater-economic-cooperation-opportunities-and-challenges>

Bengio, O. (2012). Are Iraq and Turkey models for democratisation?. *Middle East Quarterly*, 19 (3), 53-62. Available at: <https://www.meforum.org/middle-east-quarterly/iraq-turkey-democratization>

Birdişli, F., & Atawula, M. (2019). İslam İşbirliği Teşkilatı (İİT)'nin Önemi ve Bölgesel Güvenlik Sorunlarının Çözümünde İşlevsizliğinin Nedenleri. *Türk & İslam Dünyası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 20, 77-101. doi: 10.16989/TIDSAD.1668

Cengiz, S. (2020). Assessing the Astana Peace Process for Syria: Actors, Approaches, and Differences. *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 7 (2), 1-15. doi: 10.1177/2347798920901876

Charter of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. (1974). Available at: https://www.oic-oci.org/upload/documents/charter/en/oic_charter_2018_en.pdf

Cornell, S. E. (2012). What Drives Turkish Foreign Policy?. *Middle East Quarterly*, 19 (1), 13-24. Available at: <https://www.meforum.org/middle-east-quarterly/turkish-foreign-policy>

Coşkun, B.B. (2015). Neighbourhood Narratives From "Zero Problems With Neighbours" to "Precious Loneliness": Turkey's Resecuritized Middle East Policy After the Arab Spring. Monier, E. (Eds.), *Regional Insecurity After the Arab Uprisings* (pp. 187-203). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dalacoura, K. (2012). The 2011 uprisings in the Arab Middle East: Political change and geopolitical implications. *International Affairs*, 88 (1), 63-79. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2346.2012.01057.x

D'Alema, F. (2024). Turkey's approach to the Arab spring revisited: political field and foreign policy in the AKP era. *Turkish Studies*, 25 (5), 806-834. doi: 10.1080/14683849.2024.2365849

Dede, A. Y. (2011). The Arab uprisings: Debating the "Turkish Model". *Insight Turkey*, 13 (2), 23-32.

Ehteshami, A., & Elik, S. (2011). Turkey's Growing Relations with Iran and the Arab Middle East. *Turkish Studies*, 12 (4), 643-662. doi: 10.1080/14683849.2011.624322

Ennis, C. A., & Momani, B. (2013). Shaping the Middle East in the Midst of the Arab Uprisings: Turkish and Saudi Foreign Policy Strategies. *Third World Quarterly*, 34 (6), 1127-1144. doi: 10.1080/01436597.2013.802503



Fidan, H. (2023). Turkish Foreign Policy at the Turn of the 'Century of Türkiye': Challenges, Vision, Objectives, and Transformation. *Insight Turkey*, 25 (3), 11-25. doi: 10.25253/99.2023253.1

Göksel, O. (2018). Eurocentrism Awakened: The Arab Uprisings and the Search for a "Modern" Middle East. H. Işıksal, & O. Göksel (Eds.), *Turkey's Relations with the Middle East: Political Encounters after the Arab Spring* (pp. 33-51). Switzerland: Springer.

Hale, W. (2019). Turkey, the U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War. *Insight Turkey*, 21 (4), 25-40. doi: 10.25253/99.2019214.02

Hashmat, S. A. (2011). The OIC's potential, capabilities and constraints for International Conflict Resolution. *Strategic Studies*, 31 (1-2), 107-135. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48529349>

Hossain, I. (2012). The Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC): Nature, Role, and the Issues. *Journal of Third World Studies*, 29 (1), 287-314. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45194863>

İhsanoğlu, E. (1997). Turkey in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference: An Overview. *Insight Turkey*, (7), 93-112. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26726869?seq=10>

Khan, M. S. (2015). The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East. *Policy Perspectives: The Journal of the Institute of Policy Studies*, 12 (1), 31-50. doi: 10.13169/polipers.12.1.0031

Kireççi, M. A. (2018). Turkey's Leadership in the Jerusalem Crisis. *Insight Turkey*, 20 (2), 67-78. doi: 10.25253/99.2018202.05

Kirişçi, K. (2011). Turkey's "Demonstrative Effect" and the Transformation of the Middle East. *Insight Turkey*, 13 (2), 33-55. Available at: <https://www.insightturkey.com/articles/turkeys-demonstrative-effect-and-the-transformation-of-the-middle-east>

Koç, N. (2019). İslâm Dünyasında Birlik Arayışları: İslâm Konferansı -İslâm İşbirliği Teşkilatı ve Türkiye. *Türk- İslam Medeniyeti Akademik Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 14 (28), 261-286. http://ktpmakale.isam.org.tr/detayilhmklzt.php?navdil=.ar&midno=138388125&Dergi_valkod=0617&YayinTarihi=2019&Cilt=XIV&Sayi=28

Kulaklıkaya, M. (2025). Türkiye and the OIC: Navigating Challenges and Strengthening Alliances. *Insight Turkey*, 27 (1), 37-52. doi: 10.25253/99.2025271.3

Michiels, M., & Kizilkaya, Z. (2022). Mediation in Syria: A Comparative Analysis of the Astana and the Geneva Processes. *Syria Studies*, 14 (1), 1-40. Available at: <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/syria/article/view/2486>

Mohamad, F. A. (2023). *The Astana Process Six Years On: Peace or Deadlock in Syria?*. Retrieved May 17, 2025, from Carnegie Endowment: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2023/08/the-astana-process-six-years-on-peace-or-deadlock-in-syria?lang=en>



Nabiev, R., & Nafikov, I. (2021). The Astana Process as an International Platform for Middle Eastern Regional Security: the Russian Mission. İ. Topsakal, & A. Askerov (Eds.), *Contemporary Turkish - Russian Relations From Past to Future* (pp. 197-212). Istanbul: Istanbul University Press.

Öniş, Z. (2012). Turkey and the Arab Spring: Between ethics and self-interest. *Insight Turkey*, 14 (3), 45-63. Available at: <https://www.insightturkey.com/articles/turkey-and-the-arab-spring-between-ethics-and-self-interest>

Öniş, Z. (2014). Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East. *Mediterranean Politics*, 19 (2), 203-219. doi: 10.1080/13629395.2013.868392

Özdemir, E. (2010). Turkey's Middle East Policy in the Post-Cold War Era. *History Studies International Journal of History*, 2, 271-285. doi: 10.9737/hist_150

Öztürk, M., & Duman, M. (2023). A Founding Role in Türkiye's Africa Policy: The Action Plan for Opening to Africa. *Insight Turkey*, 25 (3): 223-240. doi: 10.25253/99.2023253.12

Philips, C. (2022). The international system and the Syrian civil war. *International Relations*, 36 (3), 358-381. doi: 10.1177/00471178221097908

Sheikh, F. (2017). Who Speaks for the Islamic World? Religion, Identity and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 18 (1), 117-121. doi: 10.1080/21567689.2017.1298296

Süsler, B., & Alden, C. (2022). Turkey and African agency: the role of Islam and commercialism in Turkey's Africa policy. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 60 (4): 597-617. doi: 10.1017/S0022278X22000349

Talukdar, I., & Anas, O. (2018). The Astana Process and the Future of Peaceful Settlement of the Syrian Crisis: A Status Note. Nova Deli: Indian Council of World Affairs.

Tepeciklioğlu, E. E., Vreÿ, F., & Baser, B. (2024). Introduction: Turkey and Africa: Motivations, Challenges and Future Prospects. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 26(3): 289-294. doi: 10.1080/19448953.2023.2236514

Vogel, A. (2023). Russian- Iranian- Turkish Trilateral Relations in the Syrian Civil War. *Pathways to Peace and Security*, 1, 76-110. doi: 10.20542/2307-1494-2023-1-76-110

Yönten, H., & Denemark, R. A. (2023). Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa under the AKP: an empirical analysis. *Turkish Studies*, 24 (5): 832-852. doi: 10.1080/14683849.2023.2222525

COMPLEMENTARY OR CONTRADICTION? TÜRKİYE'S EMERGING MIDDLE POWER INTERACTIONS WITH THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

GONCA OĞUZ GÖK

goncaoguzgok@gmail.com

Associate Professor at the Department of International Relations, Marmara University, Istanbul (Turkey). <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8056-8952>

NEVRA ESENTÜRK

nesenturk@yahoo.com

Associate Professor at the Department of International Relations, Yalova University, Yalova (Turkey). <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3132-9760>

Abstract

This paper investigates whether Türkiye's policies towards the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) are complementary or contradictory, situating the analysis within the broader discourse of emerging middle power diplomacy and the regionalisation of globalisation. Emerging or third-wave middle powers are pivotal in acting between regional and global governance structures, utilising multilateral frameworks to address complex international challenges as well as regional issues. Türkiye's foreign policy has often been interpreted through the lens of its hybrid identity, positioning at the intersection of multiple regions conceptualised as a "cusp state" or "liminal" state. Türkiye's growing engagement with the UN and long-standing normative and behavioural efforts of being a member of the EU exemplify its emerging middle power status, where regional efforts intersect with global ambitions. While the UN provides a universal platform for addressing global issues and gaining status in global governance, the EU offers more focused, normative, and region-specific opportunities. This paper evaluates the question of whether Türkiye's dual institutional engagement with the EU and the UN represents alignment or tension, thereby enriching the ongoing discussion on the regionalisation of globalisation. In order to do that, the paper utilises a comparative analysis of policy documents, official statements, and diplomatic efforts in certain niche areas of Türkiye's multilateral strategies in the UN and the EU throughout the 2000s. In doing so, it speaks to a growing body of work that calls into question linear or harmonious assumptions about the interplay between regionalism and multilateralism in emerging middle power strategies and their implications for middle power theory.

Keywords

Türkiye, Emerging Middle Powers, European Union, United Nations, Regional and Global Governance.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa se as políticas da Turquia em relação às Nações Unidas (ONU) e à União Europeia (UE) são complementares ou contraditórias, situando a análise no âmbito mais



amplo do discurso sobre a diplomacia emergente das potências médias e a regionalização da globalização. As potências médias emergentes ou da terceira vaga são fundamentais na interação entre as estruturas de governação regional e global, utilizando quadros multilaterais para abordar desafios internacionais complexos, bem como questões regionais. A política externa da Turquia tem sido frequentemente interpretada através da lente da sua identidade híbrida, posicionando-se na intersecção de várias regiões concebidas como um «Estado liminar» ou «Estado limítrofe». O crescente envolvimento da Turquia com a ONU e os esforços normativos e comportamentais de longa data para ser membro da UE exemplificam o seu estatuto emergente de potência média, onde os esforços regionais se cruzam com as ambições globais. Enquanto a ONU fornece uma plataforma universal para abordar questões globais e ganhar status na governança global, a UE oferece oportunidades mais focadas, normativas e específicas para cada região. Este artigo avalia a questão de saber se o duplo envolvimento institucional da Turquia com a UE e a ONU representa alinhamento ou tensão, enriquecendo assim a discussão em curso sobre a regionalização da globalização. Para tal, o artigo utiliza uma análise comparativa de documentos políticos, declarações oficiais e esforços diplomáticos em determinadas áreas específicas das estratégias multilaterais da Turquia na ONU e na UE ao longo da década de 2000. Ao fazê-lo, refere-se a um conjunto crescente de trabalhos que questionam pressupostos lineares ou harmoniosos sobre a interação entre regionalismo e multilateralismo nas estratégias das potências médias emergentes e as suas implicações para a teoria das potências médias.

Palavras-chave

Turquia, potências médias emergentes, União Europeia, Nações Unidas, governação regional e global.

How to cite this article

Gök, Gonca Oğuz & Esentürk, Nevra (2025). Complementary or Contradictory? Türkiye's Emerging Middle Power Interactions with the United Nations and the European Union. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 248-271. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.13>

Article submitted on 02nd June 2025 and accepted for publication on 08th October 2025.





COMPLEMENTARY OR CONTRADICTION? TÜRKİYE'S EMERGING MIDDLE POWER INTERACTIONS WITH THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

GONCA OĞUZ GÖK

NEVRA ESENTÜRK

Introduction

The growing scholarly attention to emerging middle powers reflects a broader interest in understanding how states situated between traditional great powers and developing countries shape the evolving architecture of regional and global governance. Traditional middle powers are frequently conceptualised as constructive and stabilising actors, operating within multilateral frameworks and contributing to the legitimacy and functionality of existing international institutions (Joordan, 2003). Conceptualised as "Southern middle powers", states like Brazil and South Africa increasingly pursue selective multilateralism, either by engaging only in regimes aligned with their national interests or by playing a catalytic role through niche diplomacy to support and revitalise the liberal international order (Efsthopoulos, 2021). Joordan (2017) argued very early that the emerging middle power concept has lost its analytical value, as emerging states increasingly defy the behavioural expectations historically tied to this category. He suggests abandoning the term in favour of more precise tools that reflect the strategic diversity of countries like Turkey, Brazil, and India. (Joordan, 2017). Most recently, Robertson & Carr (2023) called for the historization of the middle power concept, asking, "Is anyone a middle power?" Emerging middle powers are frequently characterised by their regional influence and their capacity to "punch above their weight" in international affairs. The literature often assumes that not only regional activism reinforces middle powers' global influence, but the fate of the liberal international order is also highly tied to the role and influence of regional powers (Aydin, 2021).

Within this debate, Türkiye emerges as a particularly salient case, given its multiple identities, shifting regional and multilateral alignments, and increasingly complex engagement with formal and informal global governance institutions. This paper interrogates the extent to which the regional and global roles of emerging middle powers align or potentially conflict, particularly at a time in which the liberal international order and its norms and institutions, as well as conceptualisations, are being contested. In order to answer that question, this paper investigates Türkiye's engagement with the UN



and the EU as an emerging middle power throughout the 2000s. These two formal platforms differ in terms of geographic scope, normative foundations, and institutional logic, yet both have served as key arenas in which Ankara has continuously projected its international identity and pursued recognition of its status.

Much of the literature has focused on various dimensions of Türkiye's middle power efforts (Parlar Dal, & Dipama, 2024; Sarı, & Sula, 2024; Islam and Nyadera, 2024; Kutlay and Öniş, 2021), including specific regions such as Asia (Ü ngör, 2025), the Middle East (Öniş and Kutlay, 2017) and Europe/EU (Düzgit, 2025; Soyaltin-Colella and Demiryol, 2023), as well as efforts in the UN platform as an emerging middle power, more broadly. This study attempts to direct specific attention to a relatively understudied area by analysing Türkiye's middle power efforts in the EU and the UN in a comparative perspective. Despite not attaining full membership status, Türkiye has maintained an enduring engagement with the EU, spanning decades of institutional alignment, economic interdependence, and norm-driven dialogue. As Senem Aydın-Düzgit (2023) argues, Ankara's relationship with the EU serves not only as a regional anchor but also as a litmus test for its alignment with liberal international norms, especially in periods marked by global democratic retreat. The EU's emphasis on democratic norms and normative institutional convergence aligns closely with the ideational aspects of middle power theory, while the economic interdependence between Türkiye and the EU contributes significantly to the material foundation of Ankara's regional and international presence (Düzgit, 2023; Aydın, 2021). Hence, Türkiye's candidacy status and institutionalised ties with the EU provide a unique empirical setting to assess key dimensions of emerging middle power role, including material capacities such as trade and economic integration, as well as ideational dynamics, particularly in relation to democratic reforms specifically and normative role more generally. In this respect, juxtaposing Türkiye's engagement with both the EU and the UN allows for a more careful examination of whether regional and global institutional roles of middle powers align or diverge. While existing studies have explored Türkiye's regional diplomacy or its normative contestation with the EU individually (Düzgit, 2023), to the best of our knowledge, none have assessed how these dual institutional engagements in the UN and the EU interact under the evolving conditions of the post-hegemonic international order. This study aims to contribute by treating the UN and the EU not as isolated arenas but as intersecting formal international platforms through which Türkiye's middle power role is articulated, constrained, or reinforced.

In order to do this, the paper builds on the widely accepted definition of the middle power role that encompasses material, ideational, and behavioural dimensions. Material capacity, particularly economic development, remains a foundational element of the middle power role, but is increasingly insufficient on its own. Ideational dimension is highly related to domestic democratic practices and normative discourse, and has been a critical dimension of middle power conceptualisations in literature. Lastly, behavioural elements are defined as active participation in multilateral institutions, coalition-building, and niche diplomacy, among others (Carr, 2014).



Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative document-based research design to examine Türkiye's middle power role in its engagements with the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU). The analysis draws on official speeches, policy documents, and diplomatic initiatives from the early 2000s to the present. Sources were selected according to three criteria: (i) relevance to Türkiye's multilateral strategies in either the UN or EU; (ii) significance within one of the three historical periods (2001–2009, 2010–2015, 2016–present); and (iii) availability as official and verifiable primary material.

The periodisation reflects critical turning points in Turkey's middle power role in both institutions, shaped by systemic, regional, and domestic transformations. The first period (2001/2–2009/10) corresponds to EU-driven reforms and active multilateral diplomacy culminating in Türkiye's election to the UN Security Council in 2009. The second period (2010–2015/16) was marked by regional turbulence following the Arab uprisings and by Türkiye's unsuccessful UN bid, reflecting growing scepticism about its trajectory. The third period (2016–present) has unfolded in the context of democratic regression, economic fragility, and the broader retreat of liberal internationalism. Framing the analysis through these periods makes it possible to compare how systemic, regional, and domestic factors have shaped Türkiye's middle power role across the UN and EU, and whether its strategies produced complementarity or contradiction.

Türkiye's middle power role was assessed through the comparative lens of complementarity and contradiction, structured along the material, ideational, and behavioural dimensions. To make these concepts analytically clear, each dimension was connected to observable indicators drawn from the selected policy materials. The material dimension was examined through budgetary commitments, institutional contributions, and support for multilateral initiatives, such as financial or logistical backing for UN and EU programs. The ideational dimension focused on Türkiye's stance on democracy, human rights, and broader normative commitments in both the UN and the EU, as well as the role it sought to assume within these organisations. The behavioural dimension was analysed through diplomatic activism, which included assuming leadership in specific niche areas, coalition-building within the UN and the EU, and the ability to generate outcomes such as election to positions like the UNSC seat or the inability to create outcomes in mediating the Iran Nuclear Issue on the UN platform. Analyses of "complementarity" refer to instances where Türkiye's material, ideational and behavioural dimensions of the middle power role in the UN and EU reinforced each other (e.g. EU-driven reforms enhancing credibility in UN forums), while "contradiction" refers to divergences across the two institutions (e.g. reformist rhetoric at the UN coinciding with democratic backsliding and stalled EU accession). Informal practices and non-public records were excluded in order to focus on formal, institutionalised policy initiatives and outputs. As another limitation, the voting behaviours in both organisations were not examined in detail, as the study prioritises declared policies and initiatives over formal roll-call records. These decisions inevitably introduce limitations, since reliance on official discourse may overstate coherence and underrepresent informal or contradictory practices, but the analysis was situated within the broader literature on emerging middle powers.



Emerging Middle Powers in between Regional and Global Governance

The concept of middle power has evolved significantly within the field of international relations. Traditionally, middle powers have been defined as states that are neither great nor small but possess sufficient material resources and diplomatic capacity to exert influence in multilateral settings. These states tend to favour rules-based international order, multilateral engagement and are often seen as stabilisers within the global system as "good international citizens" (Cooper, 2011). Nye's smart power index conceptualises national power as a deliberate mix of hard power (e.g. military and economic might) and soft power (cultural and diplomatic influence) to yield effective influence (Nye, 2011). Similarly, Cline's capability measures aggregate tangible resources - such as population size, economic strength, and military force - and then scales them by intangible factors like strategic purpose and national will in an equation for "perceived power" (Cline, 1977). While these tools offer a quantifiable measure of a state's overall power assets, their relevance for analysing Türkiye's middle power role is limited. Middle power status is not determined by raw capabilities alone; it is also defined by how states like Türkiye leverage their capabilities through active diplomacy, coalition-building, and normative leadership in international forums - dimensions that static indices struggle to capture (Cooper & Parlar Dal, 2016; Jordaan, 2017). In Türkiye's case, its ability to "punch above its weight" in regional and multilateral settings owes as much to policy entrepreneurship and strategic alignments as it does to measurable resources, underscoring the need to look beyond composite power indices when assessing its middle power role (Jordaan, 2017).

While early middle-power conceptualisations focused largely on countries like Canada and Australia, contemporary scholarship recognises the emergence of a diverse group of "emerging middle powers," particularly from the Global South, including Mexico, Indonesia, and South Korea, among others. These states differ from traditional middle powers not only in terms of geography and political culture but also in their preferences and institutional behaviour. A key distinction among middle powers lies in their material, ideational, and behavioural dimensions (Karadeniz and Oğuz Gök, 2019). Materially, emerging middle powers possess growing economic capabilities and regional influence, enabling participation in platforms like the G20 and MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Türkiye, and Australia). Ideationally, however, many of these states exhibit democratic fragility or normative ambiguity, sometimes conceptualised as hybrid regimes (Öniş, 2017), authoritarian middle powers (Aydın-Düzgit, 2023) or awkward ones (Abbondanza and Wilkins, 2022), making their commitment to liberal values less clear-cut than their traditional counterparts. Behaviorally, they often engage in coalition-building, mediation and engage with niche diplomacy areas. In recent years, emerging middle powers such as Türkiye have increasingly turned to military capacity and defence industry activism as instruments to elevate their status within the shifting international order (Parlar Dal and Dipama, 2024). However, although the use of military technology is a defining element of emerging middle powers, it mostly has boosting effects on domestic regime survival (Soyaltın-Colella and Demiryol, 2023).

The middle power's dual role in the regional-global nexus has also been discussed in the literature. Nolte (2010) earlier argued that regional leadership could serve as a platform for global engagement for middle powers. Aydın (2021) suggests that emerging middle



powers tend to contribute to the liberal international order in complex ways, especially through their regional policies as democratic role models in support of institutional norms. However, some recent empirical cases challenge this assumption. For instance, South Korea's middle power identity is deeply conditioned by regional security dynamics and U.S.-China rivalry, which constrain its global positioning despite high levels of institutional engagement (Mo, 2017). Furthermore, some potential regional powers might not exercise leadership as demonstrated by Brazil's detachment from South America following Cardoso and Lula presidencies (Nolte and Schenoni, 2024). Emerging middle powers often oscillate between regional activism and global aspiration, creating a fragmented and sometimes contradictory foreign policy profile.

Scholars increasingly underscore the need to include the domestic and systemic constraints for exercising regional roles more systematically (Nolte and Schenoni, 2024). The 2008 global financial crisis, the rise of BRICS, and shifting patterns of power distribution have created new spaces for middle power activism but also exposed the limits of formal IOs. Hynd (2025) introduces a timely and critical refinement to middle power theory by analysing how these states seek repositioning in hierarchies of international status and order. Rather than merely acting as norm entrepreneurs or institutional supporters, middle powers today engage in a form of order navigation, alternating between revisionist tendencies and status quo alignment. Through the case of South Korea, Hynd (2025) also shows how elite-driven narratives and structural change enable states to reposition themselves within global hierarchies. Therefore, the relationship between regional and global roles for middle powers is neither linear nor harmonious. As Efsthopoulos (2023) and Hynd (2025) both suggest, emerging middle powers represent a hybrid category that might be both conformist and disruptive at the same time. Understanding this complexity requires moving beyond binary typologies and recognising the fragmented nature of contemporary middle power diplomacy (Efsthopoulos, 2023).

Türkiye as an Emerging Middle Power in Regional and Global Governance

Historically, the foundations for Türkiye's middle power behaviour can be observed earlier than the post-Cold War period. Barlas (2005) conceptualises Turkey's very early regional diplomatic activism in the 1930s, particularly in the Balkans and Mediterranean, as middle power activism. Despite limited material capacity, Ankara employed regional coalition-building efforts in the Balkans, which culminated in the Balkan Pact, while not being successful in the Mediterranean region. During the Cold War, Türkiye's role as a middle power in coalition-building was limited due to systemic constraints stemming from superpower rivalry. While it served multiple terms as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and aligned closely with Western allies, its multilateral engagements largely reflected the priorities of the transatlantic order (Aral, 2004). In the post-Cold War period, however, Ankara began to adopt a more active regional and global diplomacy. Beginning in the 1980s, Türkiye integrated into the neoliberal economy and began to search for a more active role in its immediate region and beyond during the Turgut Özal Era. In the 1990s, it sought to address crises such as the Bosnian War by engaging in intense diplomacy in the UN. Toward the end of the decade, this activism



was further shaped by then Foreign Minister İsmail Cem's "world state" or "global state" vision¹, which emphasised improving relations with neighbouring countries, stressing Ankara's historical and cultural legacy. These developments laid the groundwork for Turkey's regional and global middle power diplomacy in the 2000s.

Emergence of a Middle Power Role in the UN (2000-2011)

Türkiye's economic performance in the 2000s contributed to its growing involvement in multilateral platforms. After the 2001 financial crisis, the JDP (Justice and Development Party) governments implemented economic reforms, achieving annual growth rates averaging 5–7% (Gök and Karadeniz, 2018). Improved economic indicators allowed Ankara to project a more confident profile in regional and global issues. Türkiye successfully campaigned for a non-permanent UN Security Council seat for 2009–2010, securing 151 votes. Ankara's measurable material and personal contributions to the UN increased but remained relatively modest compared to rising states such as BRICS (Parlar Dal and Kurşun, 2018). Normatively, during the early 2000s, Türkiye's foreign policy discourse was characterised by a deliberate emphasis on democratic reforms and proactive multilateralism. The early JDP government prioritised alignment with EU norms, judicial reforms, and the decentralisation of state institutions.

Türkiye's diplomatic behaviour from 2002 to 2010 increasingly reflected classic middle power activism, focused on the quest for mediation, humanitarian diplomacy, and coalition-building efforts. Initiatives such as the co-sponsorship of the "Alliance of Civilisations" in 2005 provided a symbolic platform through which Ankara sought to bridge intercultural divides and promote mutual understanding in a post-9/11 environment. During this period, Turkish policymakers strived to be a mediator in various regional conflicts, often in coordination with UN efforts (Karadeniz and Gök, 2024). A notable example was Türkiye's mediation between Israel and Syria from 2007 to 2008, wherein Ankara hosted several rounds of indirect peace talks. Türkiye (in partnership with Brazil) took a role in the Iran nuclear issue in 2010 and brokered the Tehran Declaration in May 2010. This initiative demonstrated Ankara's willingness to take the initiative in the UN together with other rising powers such as Brazil. While these efforts contributed to Ankara's visibility within the UN system, they have been quite limited in terms of achieving concrete outcomes (Sever and Gök, 2016). When the deal failed to gain full traction, Turkish policymakers did not hesitate to take the step of voting against UN Security Council Resolution 1929 (June 2010), which imposed a new round of sanctions on Iran.² This was a crucial moment for Türkiye's middle power efforts at the UN. On one hand, it underscored Türkiye's mediation-first attitude, but on the other, it put Ankara at odds with the P5 consensus, revealing a potential rift between Ankara's independent activism and great power expectations. It also demonstrated the limits of its middle power activism in the UN platform due to structural factors (Gök and Sever, 2016) as well as bilateral relations with the US (Sarı Ertem, H., & Karadeniz, R. F., 2019). Nevertheless, as Sarı and Sula (2024) note, Türkiye's pursuit of initiatives in UN forums

¹ <https://www.sam.gov.tr/media/perceptions/archive/vol2/19970900/IsmailCem1.pdf>

² <https://press.un.org/en/2010/sc9948.doc.htm#:~:text=,be%20allowed%20for%20its%20implementation>



reflects a broader pattern of middle power strategies aiming to amplify normative presence despite structural constraints.

Middle Power Diplomacy under Domestic and Regional Constraints (2011-2016)

Türkiye's material power continued to grow in the early 2010s but faced mixed fortunes by mid-decade. Economically, Ankara initially enjoyed relative growth after the 2008 global financial crisis. Its GDP climbed from around \$730 billion in 2010 to over \$950 billion by 2013 (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021). This encouraged Ankara's confidence and resources to pursue projects at the UN. Türkiye elevated its profile in the G20 during this time, hosting the Antalya Summit in 2015, where the Women 20 (W20) initiative was introduced. It also joined the informal MIKTA group established in 2013, aligning with peer traditional and emerging middle powers. However, from the mid-2010s onward, Türkiye's economy began to face setbacks as domestic democratic backlash, political instability and external factors, including the Arab uprisings and regional turmoil, led to currency depreciation and slower growth rates (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021). Despite these setbacks, in 2013–2015, Türkiye contributed voluntarily to UN programs from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to United Nations Development Program (UNDP) projects. During the early 2010s, Ankara gradually increased its assessed contributions to the UN regular budget, rising from 0.62% in 2012 to 0.75% by 2014. This upward trend facilitated its entry into the Geneva Group, which comprises major financial contributors to the UN system (United Nations, 2017). Additionally, the Syrian civil war in 2011 imposed huge humanitarian burdens on Ankara and by 2015, Türkiye hosted over 2 million Syrian refugees, the largest refugee population in the world at that time. Türkiye ranked among the top 3 humanitarian aid providers in 2013–2015 and was the most generous relative to GDP. Such figures underscore that Türkiye was using its material means to gain influence in the humanitarian field. Militarily, Ankara's hard power capacity also grew more evident in this period. Türkiye began investing in defence industries, including drone technology. It undertook cross-border military operations, especially from 2015 onward, which indicated Ankara's willingness to exercise hard power when deemed necessary. In UN peacekeeping, Türkiye's troop/police contributions fluctuated but remained steady (Kaya Uyar and Sezgin, 2024).

During 2010–2015, Türkiye's normative role experienced significant challenges, which had ambivalent effects on its middle power role at the UN. In the early part of this period, Ankara initially welcomed uprisings in Arab countries, framing itself as an advocate for democratic transitions. However, as the Arab Uprisings turned more complex, with civil wars in Libya and Syria, a military coup in Egypt, Türkiye's stance became more contested. Ankara's attempt to position itself as both a regional and global actor is exemplified and tested in its engagement with regional crises, including Syria (Dağ, 2022). Consequently, Türkiye's normative credibility suffered criticisms, and Türkiye's failure to secure a UN Security Council seat in the October 2014 election, a surprising loss to Spain, was widely attributed to diminished support due to Ankara's controversial regional policies and concerns about its internal politics.



Türkiye's ideational posture was reflected in its growing critique of the UN Security Council's structure during this period. President Erdoğan began voicing the slogan "the world is bigger than five" in the UN speeches (Aral, 2019). This rhetorical stance appealed to many nations frustrated with great-power dominance, thus potentially strengthening Türkiye's image as a reformist middle power. Yet as Ankara advocated democratic values abroad, at home, there were growing criticisms of its domestic democratic credentials as well as its policy choices towards the Arap uprisings. Therefore, its normative discourse at the UN both supported and constrained its middle power role in this period. It supported it by giving Türkiye a distinctive identity (a democracy advocating for reform and humanitarianism) that set it apart from both Western great powers and non-Western authoritarian powers. But it constrained it by putting doubt on Türkiye's consistency and reliability, which adheres to the values it preaches. This tension would only grow in the next period as Ankara's domestic regime transformed and its economy faced growing tensions.

In behavioural terms, since 2010, Turkish policy makers have further institutionalised mediation efforts on the global stage (Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, 2011). In September 2010, Türkiye and Finland jointly launched the "Mediation for Peace" initiative at the UN, creating a Group of Friends of Mediation to promote the peaceful settlement of disputes. This led to the UN General Assembly's first-ever resolution on mediation (A/RES/65/283) in 2011. Türkiye's leadership was pivotal in co-sponsoring the resolution and subsequently co-chaired the Friends of Mediation group (Sofos, 2022). In June 2012, the UN, with input from Türkiye, issued the "United Nations Guidance for Effective Mediation", a handbook of best practices for mediators. Ankara showcased this as an achievement of its niche diplomacy, even translating the guidance into Turkish (the first non-UN language version) (Karadeniz and Gök, 2024). The outbreak of the Syrian civil war tested Ankara's mediation and humanitarian efforts, as Türkiye kept its border open to Syrian refugees and worked closely with UN agencies UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency), WFP (World Food Programme), and UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) to manage refugee camps. By contributing over \$2 billion per year in humanitarian aid by 2014–2015 (much of it for Syrians), Türkiye became the world's second-largest humanitarian donor after the U.S. in 2014. Ankara continued its willingness to be a major player at the UN in the humanitarian field by hosting the first-ever World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in 2016. In addition to these coalition-building and mediation efforts, Türkiye's behaviour in this period was not free of contradictions. As regional conflicts intensified, Ankara continued to choose to use hard power sources and take sides in the Syrian civil war, which will intensify in the next period.

An Asymmetrical Middle Power in Search for Strategic Autonomy in the UN (2016–Present)

Since 2016, Türkiye's material capacity as a middle power has been marked by asymmetrical trends as it continues to be strong in certain areas and highly vulnerable in others, all unfolding in a more multipolar global economic and normative context. On the one hand, Türkiye remains a sizable economy as Türkiye's status in the G20 is undiminished. Additionally, Ankara has invested in the defence industry in the past



decade and developed indigenous high-tech drone weapons. On the other hand, Türkiye's economy in the late 2010s and early 2020s has been volatile and fragile. A currency crisis in 2018 and subsequent inflation surges eroded some of Türkiye's economic gains. GDP per capita in USD terms fell, and foreign investment waned due to perceived political and financial risks. Ankara finds itself in a difficult situation of slow growth, high inflation and chronic unemployment (Öniş and Kutlay, 2021). However, Türkiye's defence expenditures and military power keep growing even at the expense of other sectors (Parlar Dal and Dipama, 2024). As of 2025, Turkey continues to contribute 117 personnel to UN Peace Operations.³

The ideational dimension of Türkiye's UN engagement since 2016 has been defined by profound domestic political changes. Domestically, in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt of July 2016, Turkish rulers adopted emergency rule, which paved the way for a new executive presidency. By 2018, Ankara had transitioned from a parliamentary democracy with substantial checks and balances to a highly centralised presidential system with power concentrated in the President. This period also saw Türkiye's Freedom House and V-Dem democracy ratings downgraded as Ankara was now classified as "not free".⁴ The rise of populist and authoritarian-leaning governments worldwide and a general retreat of liberal internationalist rhetoric meant Türkiye's democratic backlash was somewhat in parallel with the broader international trend. In this context, Ankara has reframed its ideational narrative at the UN in two main ways. First, Ankara emphasises sovereignty and non-interference as pluralist values. Turkish policymakers refer to strategic autonomy in foreign policy, which underpins their efforts to position themselves as an independent diplomatic actor, distinct from traditional Western alignments (Tüfekçi, 2025). However, there has not been a dramatic shift from its voting orientation as it continues to be mostly in common with Western states on issues related to human rights in general (Aral, 2022). Ideationally, Ankara's discourse begins to embrace a more explicitly Islamic and nationalist tone, positioning Türkiye as a voice for the Muslim world and the oppressed in the UN as President Erdoğan argued that "Islamic country with veto power on UN Security Council is no longer just a need, but an imperative"⁵. Türkiye started to demonstrate willingness to align more with a broader coalition of states (Russia, China, many in the global South) including BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa).

Türkiye's diplomatic behavior in the UN arena has been characterized by various initiatives, defined as an "unusual middle power activism" that mixes cooperation with unilateralism (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021). Chief among these was the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July 2022 which was an UN-brokered deal Türkiye facilitated between Russia and Ukraine to safely export Ukrainian grain during the ongoing war. Ankara hosted and mediated the talks in Istanbul and the resulting agreement allowed nearly 33 million tons

³ https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/01_contributions_to_un_peacekeeping_operations_by_country_and_post_86_may_2025.pdf

⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey>

⁵ President Erdoğan's address to foreign ambassadors serving in the capital Ankara, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/muslims-who-make-up-1-4-of-world-must-be-justly-represented-in-global-decision-making-bodies-turkish-president/3498834>



of grain to reach global markets.⁶ Another initiative has been promoting environmental sustainability through the "Zero Waste" project brought into the UN. In December 2022, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) unanimously adopted Türkiye's draft resolution declaring March 30 the International Day of Zero Waste, co-sponsored by 105 countries.⁷ Zero Waste has broadened Türkiye's diplomatic portfolio beyond conflict-related topics, into environment. This kind of "eco-diplomacy" is a newer behavioral dimension for Ankara. Türkiye has also sustained its earlier commitments since the late 2010s as it remains co-chair of the Group of Friends of Mediation, convening annual ministerial meetings. It works in coalitions to influence debates, and it often acts as a mediator, as seen not only in Ukraine but also in conflicts like Somalia (hosting Somalia-Somaliland talks in 2019) and between Serbia and Bosnia (facilitating meetings in 2018–2021).

In sum, Ankara's middle power efforts especially in the last decade is characterized by asymmetries across its material, ideational, and behavioral dimensions. Materially, Türkiye exhibits a paradoxical mixture of significant military and indigenous defense industry capabilities alongside persistent economic and technological dependencies. Ideationally, its foreign policy discourse is shaped by reference to a new world order, engaging selectively with established liberal norms. This manifests in a re-conceptualization of "justice" that often contests dominant interpretations, and a rhetoric that collides human rights advocacy with a strong emphasis on national sovereignty, and increasingly pluralist elements. Behaviorally, Türkiye employs a foreign policy toolkit, encompassing hard power resources together with coalition building and preventive measure, balancing efforts across competing power blocs and growing criticism towards current order while being predominantly on the side of western powers in its voting orientation towards issues at the UNGA platform. These patterns, increasingly involving informal engagements in addition to formal ones arise not merely from tactical responses but also from Türkiye's unique regional embeddedness and the inherent dynamism of the contemporary global order especially since 2010s. Ankara's foreign policy in dual institutional settings in the post-2015 presents an example of what can be conceptualized as an "*Asymmetrical Middle Power*."⁸

Türkiye's Middle Power Engagement with the European Union

Türkiye's relations with the European Union (EU) have had a long trajectory. As a middle power, Türkiye's engagement with the EU includes various political, economic, and diplomatic factors that can be explained in material, ideational and behavioral dimensions in middle power theory. Although recently the relations have reached a standstill in accession negotiations, in historical perspective, Ankara has sought closer ties with the EU as part of its modernization project in political and economic terms, and to enhance

⁶ The Black Sea Grain Initiative: What it is, and why it is important for the world." United Nations News. September 16, 2022. Accessed date April, 2025. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1126811>. Tingyang, Zhao. All under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order, translated by Joseph E. Harroff. California: University of California Press, 2021.

⁷ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/zero-waste-day#:~:text=On%2014%20December%2022%2C%20the,Waste%2C%20to%20be%20observed%20annually.>

⁸ Author's own conceptualization



its international standing in alignment with liberal international norms. Considering the deep trade relations between Türkiye and the EU, geopolitical significance, long lasting intercultural mobility between the two communities over the years, Türkiye's middle power status allows it to assert significant influence in its interactions with the EU. However, the process has been stalled with challenges and complex accession negotiations in the past decade.

Turkey's Alignment with the EU: Wide ranging Economic and Political Reforms, Optimistic Dialogue, and Strategic Positioning (2001-2009)

After 1999 Helsinki Summit when Türkiye was granted the candidacy status, the political relations between Ankara and the EU were intensified. Thus, between 2001 and 2009, Ankara's engagement with the EU was marked by significant political, economic, and diplomatic developments with some emerging challenges after 2006. This period was crucial in shaping Türkiye's aspirations for EU membership and understanding its position as a middle power within the European context.

Specifically, the period between 2001 and 2004 was also known as "the virtuous circle" (Öniş and Kutlay, 2016) or "golden age of Europeanization" (Müftüler-Baç, 2005). In this period, Türkiye adopted significant political reforms to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria and progress in its accession path to the EU. The political reforms were partly a response to the 2001 economic crisis in Türkiye, which triggered political instability and calls for reform. Under these domestic circumstances, based on 2001 National Program for the adoption of *the acquis communautaire*, Ankara adopted wide-ranging political reforms between 2001 and 2004 to expand fundamental human rights, freedoms, and democratization. These reforms can be classified as "increased legal protection of fundamental human rights of all Turkish citizens irrespective of religious and ethnic origin, the role of military in Turkish politics and the freedom of expression in Türkiye" (Müftüler-Baç, 2005: 22). There were also judicial reforms to enhance the independence of the judiciary. In addition, reforms concerning civil society and political participation were encouraged to have a more vibrant civil society. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) became more active in promoting democratic values and monitoring government actions (Öniş, 2003; Eralp, 2009). Müftüler-Baç (2005) argues that the EU acted as a powerful external catalyst for these internal political and legal reforms, intensifying the Europeanization process in this period. Öniş and Kutlay (2016) claim that the virtuous cycle in this period boosted Ankara's capacity as a role model in ideational terms and that the EU membership process had a transformative impact on that.

In addition to the high pace of political reforms mentioned above, in the period between 2001 and 2004, Türkiye adopted critical economic reforms following the severe economic crisis of 2001. The economic reforms required to fulfil the Copenhagen economic criteria, particularly in relation to its pursuit of EU membership, were closely aligned with the expectations of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) programs. These reforms focused on achieving fiscal discipline and structural adjustments within the Turkish economy. Key areas of focus included the control of public expenditure to ensure fiscal stability and reduce



deficits (Öniş, 2003). In the financial sector, reforms had the objective of establishing greater transparency and promoting stability. In addition to the reform of agricultural subsidies, progress in privatisation was essential to shift towards a more market-oriented economy (Öniş, 2003). These economic reforms were crucial for Türkiye's alignment with EU economic norms and enhanced its middle power activism materially.

Ankara formally began its accession negotiations in October 2005, a critical milestone that underscored the relationship's complexities (European Commission, 2005). In 2004, the accession of South Cyprus to the EU without a resolution to the Cyprus issue created a significant impediment to Türkiye's EU accession path (Eralp, 2009). It led directly to the stall of a substantial part of the accession negotiations and undermined Ankara's political will for reform. Thus, in the first few years following accession negotiations, Türkiye continued its political reforms at a rather slow pace as part of its commitment to the Copenhagen criteria: democracy, rule of law, human rights, protection of minorities, and a functioning market economy (Eralp, 2009; Özer, 2015). The 2007 constitutional reforms exemplified Ankara's efforts to bolster political pluralism and judicial independence. These reforms had the objective of addressing human rights concerns and combating corruption (European Commission, 2008). Despite progress, there were criticisms, particularly in the implementation of human rights and freedom of expression (European Commission, 2009). Although the effectiveness and long-term implementation of these reforms faced constant challenges and scrutiny, the political reforms during this period were considered significant as Ankara attempted to meet the EU membership conditions. The dynamics between the EU and Türkiye were complex, marked by both cooperation in reform efforts and criticism over the issues of human rights and democratic governance.

Türkiye-EU relations between 2001 and 2009 were marked by optimistic engagement and dialogue in behavioural terms, focusing on the accession process and the required reforms. Ankara also engaged in security cooperation with the EU during this period, mostly within the framework of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). Ankara actively participated in the crisis management missions headed by the EU, such as the EU mission in Kosovo (EULEX) and the EU Force Operation in Bosnia Herzegovina (European Commission, 2009) and provided support for the second EU police mission in Bosnia Herzegovina. According to EU officials, Türkiye's strategic significance was further strengthened by its proactive involvement in international peacekeeping and conflict resolution, which complemented the EU's regional security goals. Despite progress in many areas, there were persistent challenges, including the Cyprus issue and human rights concerns in this period.

Changing Dynamics in Türkiye-EU Relations: Slow Down and Stagnation of Accession Negotiations, Complex Diplomacy, and Regional Challenges (2010-2016)

In this period, accession negotiations slowed down considerably due to political tensions and disputes over issues such as Cyprus, human rights, and setbacks and retreats on democratic norms (Müftüler-Baç, 2016; Özer, 2015). Türkiye attained a crucial position



in regional geopolitics because of the instability caused by the Syrian civil war, the emergence of ISIS, and the 2015 refugee crisis. Thus, Türkiye-EU relations during this period were marked by the EU's growing perception of Türkiye as an essential partner in dealing with these challenges.

Between 2010 and 2016, in behavioural terms, the diplomatic landscape between Türkiye and the EU was marked by both cooperation and persistent challenges. Although Ankara and the EU reached a migration deal in 2016 to control irregular migration as a result of efforts to manage the refugee crisis (European Council, 2016), the July 2016 coup attempt severely altered Türkiye's political climate. In this period, the diplomatic relations became increasingly contentious due to disagreements over Ankara's military actions and tension in the Eastern Mediterranean. Throughout this period, the EU raised concerns about human rights violations, freedom of the press, and the independence of the judiciary in Türkiye (European Commission, 2016).

In spite of these obstacles, materially, the Turkish economy grew rapidly during this time, strengthening its standing as a middle power (World Bank, 2016). Ankara became an important economic partner of the EU as a result of the Customs Union with the EU, which was completed in 1996, and it allowed for increased trade relations between the two parties (Müftüler-Baç, 2016). Furthermore, Türkiye became an essential transit route for diversifying energy supplies due to its strategic location, especially regarding the Southern Gas Corridor. This indicates that bilateral relations have become more interdependent in energy-related matters (European Commission, 2012).

One of the most urgent issues in EU-Türkiye relations was the migration crisis. In 2015, Europe faced a massive influx of refugees, many of whom crossed through Ankara. This situation prompted the EU to engage with Türkiye more closely on migration issues. With the support of Germany, Türkiye, and the EU, they agreed on a Joint Action Plan in October 2015 to work together on migration (European Commission, 2015). Then, as part of this initiative, in March 2016, Ankara and the EU **agreed on** a migration deal to manage the refugee crisis. The March 2016 deal aimed to curtail the influx of migrants into Europe and marked a significant turning point in Türkiye's bargaining position with the EU. In exchange for cooperation in controlling migration, the EU committed to providing financial aid and reviving accession negotiations, illustrating a transactional nature in their engagement (European Council, 2016). Beyond these issues, Ankara's large population and persistent economic instability raise concerns for the EU. As a result, while there were opportunities for cooperation, they were frequently overshadowed by mutual distrust and divergent priorities. Saatçioğlu (2019) argues that in the post-2015 refugee crisis, Turkey-EU relations transformed into functionalism, which was marked by a strategic partnership based on interdependence and a retreat from the EU's conditionality approach.

Transactional Relationship with the EU: Economic Ties, Security dilemmas, and strategic partnership (2016-Present)

In the period between 2016 and 2025, Türkiye's engagement with the EU can be described as a significant interaction between a middle power and a regional bloc that



encompasses a variety of factors, including political dynamics, economic ties, and regional security concerns. Important changes occurred during this period, as illustrated by strategic partnerships, Türkiye's domestic issues, shifting EU priorities, and geopolitical challenges.

Ankara's relations with the EU entered a period of stagnation after the July 2016 coup attempt. Türkiye's strategic priorities often clashed with the EU's significant concerns about human rights and the decline of democratic norms in Türkiye (European Commission, 2016). During this period, Ankara's internal political trajectory and the EU's ongoing emphasis on conditionality with regard to the rule of law and fundamental rights diverged significantly (European Commission, 2017; Öniş, 2023). In ideational terms, Türkiye's increasing distance from the EU was highlighted in the European Council's December 2016 conclusions, which resulted in a formal halt to accession negotiations with no new chapters being opened or closed (European Commission, 2024). Despite these obstacles, Ankara made efforts to re-establish itself as the EU's vital ally in tackling difficult regional issues, especially the migration crisis, which came to the fore.

The EU and Türkiye continued to interact in the field of migration, even after the (de facto) freezing of accession negotiations. Thus, the 2015 refugee crisis continued to play a crucial role in bilateral relations. Although there were fewer irregular crossings at first, there were still implementation issues and humanitarian concerns regarding the migration crisis (Saatçioğlu, 2019; Kaya, 2020; Kirişçi, 2014). As previously noted, the EU and Türkiye came to a major agreement in March 2016 whereby Ankara agreed to control the refugee flow to Europe in return for political and financial concessions (European Council, 2016). This arrangement solidified Ankara's position as a key transit country while enabling it to exert influence within EU decision-making realms. In this period, the EU continued to provide financial aid to Türkiye for hosting refugees. However, there were debates regarding the adequacy and timeliness of this support, and Ankara often criticised the EU for not fulfilling its financial commitments swiftly (Kaya, 2020). Currently, the migration deal is not in effect, which came to a halt in 2020 due to political dynamics and complexities of border control issues.

From the economic perspective, Türkiye was consistently perceived as an emerging market with substantial economic prospects, rendering it an attractive partner for the EU in material terms (European Commission, 2024). Economic cooperation continued, especially in the areas of trade and investment, despite persistent political tensions. The EU continued to be Ankara's largest trading partner. As a candidate country to the EU, Ankara sought to enhance these economic ties to influence EU policy frameworks in ways that could facilitate its economic growth and stability. Debates around updating the Customs Union started, focusing on areas like services and agricultural products, though no significant breakthroughs were made by 2024. Özer (2020) argues that modernising the EU-Türkiye Customs Union is a pragmatic initiative driven by shared economic interest and vital for a cooperative and functional relationship. Türkiye's potential as a regional economic hub, particularly in the areas of infrastructure and energy, has been recognised by the EU. However, the political climate and economic crisis affected investment sentiment from European companies (European Commission, 2024).



Ankara has a crucial role in tackling regional security issues because of its strategic location at the intersection of Europe and Asia. The rise of terrorism and instability in neighbouring regions underscored Ankara's importance as a middle power (European Commission, 2024). Engagement with the EU encompassed discussions on security cooperation, counter-terrorism measures, and the management of issues pertaining to the Middle East, particularly the Syrian civil war. Additionally, bilateral relations were further strained by tensions over energy exploration rights in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially in the context of disputes with Greece and Cyprus (European Commission, 2022).

In this period between 2016 and the present, despite facing major obstacles arising from political issues, security dilemmas, and conflicting views on fundamental human rights, Türkiye attempted to use its position as a middle power to strengthen its ties with the EU, albeit at a low level. Ankara's middle power engagement with the EU during this period was defined by a functional, strategy-oriented partnership based on common interests. In addition, in the post-2016 period, in behavioural terms, high-level dialogue meetings continued to form a significant aspect of the relations, particularly on areas of migration, security, energy, agriculture and trade (European Commission, 2024). These meetings, together with official contacts between the two sides, indicate a sustained attempt to put the relations on practical cooperation and find solutions to common problems, despite the wider political hindrances and standstill in the accession negotiations.

In Guise of Conclusion: Turkey's Middle Power Role in the Regional-Global Nexus

Turkey's evolving role in the UN and EU over the past two decades reflects key insights for middle power theory, especially regarding how material, ideational, and behavioural dimensions are shaped by systemic and domestic changes. At the UN, Turkey's contributions fluctuated across time, marked by heightened activism in the early 2000s and 2010s, but a gradual shift toward selective engagement in the post-2016 period. Although economic interdependence remained steady in Turkey-EU relations, democratic backsliding strained ideational alignment, transforming the relationship from aspirational integration to transactional cooperation. Despite Turkey's engagements in both settings, its behavioural strategies at the UN allowed for more flexible, albeit limited, influence, especially in humanitarian and mediation initiatives. Within the EU, however, formal structures imposed stricter conditionalities and thus constrained Turkey's capacity to act autonomously.

During the 2000–2015 period, Turkey's engagement in both arenas displayed parallel intensifications in visibility and initiative-taking, particularly in mediation diplomacy and norm adherence. Yet, this did not always translate into tangible influence. In the UN, despite active campaigning for Security Council membership and increased budgetary contributions, limitations in decision-making, which are often dominated by permanent members, restricted Turkey's capacity to shape outcomes (Sever and Gök, 2016). Within the EU, by contrast, while Turkey adopted significant political, legal and economic



reforms to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria and to align with *acquis communautaire*, the accession negotiation process stalled, limiting its normative influence and complicating its status as a transformative actor (Table 1).

During the post-2016 period, one can trace a clearer divergence between its middle power role in both institutions (Table 1). In the UN, Turkey has continued to participate in multilateral settings and champion certain humanitarian initiatives (e.g., grain corridor diplomacy), yet with a more state-centric and nationalist tone, relying increasingly on hard power instruments. In the EU, engagement has increasingly been characterised by transactional cooperation, strategic partnership, and bilateralism, marking a shift from previous transformative ambitions (Düzgit, 2021).

These divergent dynamics suggest that middle power strategies are context-dependent and that institutions like the UN and EU expose different facets of middle power diplomacy for Türkiye. While middle power theory often assumes coherence between regional and global behaviours, the Turkish case illustrates a fragmented pattern shaped by asymmetries in institutional constraints, domestic and regional conditions. From a theoretical standpoint, this supports the view that emerging middle powers are not homogenous actors but vary according to institutional contexts and domestic factors (Hynd, 2025).

The asymmetry between Turkey and the EU in terms of institutional hierarchy and normative expectations contrasts with the more flexible setting of the UN, except for platforms such as the UN Security Council. This, in turn, suggests that while Turkey continues to behave as a middle power in both arenas, the forms and degrees of its influence differ to a large extent (Table 2). Furthermore, the comparison highlights that regional activism does not always reinforce global activism and vice versa. In the UN, Turkey's policies on regional issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the Syrian crisis elevated its visibility but occasionally constrained its ability to build broader coalitions due to structural limitations of the UN. In the EU, regional neighbourhood policy instruments offered opportunities for deeper cooperation, yet political divergences in the post-2013 period weakened the credibility of its normative claims. Ultimately, Turkey's case illustrates the variation and context-specificity of middle power diplomacy (Efsthopoulos, 2023), reinforcing arguments that rising and emerging powers, especially those with hybrid or liminal identities, occupy an ambivalent position in global governance. This underscores the need to rethink — if not say goodbye — the emerging middle power frameworks by accounting for the specific interplay between domestic transformation and institutional embeddedness.

While Türkiye's proactive diplomacy and EU-driven reforms enhanced its credibility in multilateral forums, direct evidence of reputational payoffs remains uneven. For instance, Turkey's election to the UN Security Council in 2009 reflected broad diplomatic support (UN General Assembly voting records), while EU progress reports of the early 2000s acknowledged democratic and institutional reforms. Yet systematic third-party evaluations of Türkiye's normative influence within the UN remain limited, which could be further explored in future research.

Future research could further deepen this analysis by systematically examining UN voting records to assess how Turkey's coalition-building strategies shape its middle power role.



Such an approach could clarify whether Turkey acts as a consistent coalition partner or adopts issue-based leadership in specific niche areas. In addition, exploring the regional dimension of coalition building may provide valuable insights, particularly given that the European Union itself represents a complex set of regional perspectives. Analyses that connect Turkey's regional leadership roles with its broader global positioning in both the UN and the EU could offer a deeper understanding of how emerging middle powers balance regional influence and global ambitions.

Appendix

Table 1. Comparative Outlook of Turkey's Emerging Middle Power Efforts towards the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU)

Dimension	2001/2–2009/10		2010–2015/16		2016–Present	
	UN	EU	UN	EU	UN	EU
Material	Increased financial contributions to the UN; G20 membership	Notable improvements in macroeconomic indicators, structural reforms	Increased UN budget contribution; Geneva Group membership;	Robust economic growth; enhanced trade relations; growing energy interdependence	Continued but stable UN budget, moderate economic strain, economic volatility and uncertainty	Continued trade cooperation; customs union update discussions; regional economic hub potential
Ideational	Liberal multilateralism rhetoric	Wide-ranging political reforms; high pace of Europeanization (2001–2004)	Justice-based discourse calls for UNSC Reform (e.g., the world is bigger than five)	Setback in democratic reforms; slow down and stagnation in accession negotiations	Selective normative engagement leans towards more pluralist elements (e.g. sovereignty)	Democratic backsliding; (de facto) frozen accession negotiations
Behavioral	Non-permanent UNSC seat, Mediation, Alliance of Civilisations	Intensive government–civil society interaction; optimistic engagement	Friends of Mediation, regional initiatives on Gaza and Syria; Brazil cooperation on Iran; limited impact on UNSC outcomes	Cooperation on migration, diplomatic tensions	Selective multilateralism, Mediation efforts; use of military hard power (e.g., Syria operations); new niche areas like environment (e.g., Zero Waste)	Security & migration cooperation; strategic, transactional partnership; high-level dialogue meetings

The table indicates the interactions of the evolving role of Turkey's middle power efforts towards the UN and the EU in material, ideational and behavioural dimensions.

**Table 2.** Turkey's Middle Power Role in the Regional-Global Nexus

		2001/2– 2009/10	2010–2015/16	2016–Present
UN	Material	Medium	High	Medium
	Ideational	High	Medium	Low
	Behavioral	High	Medium	Medium
EU	Material	High	High	Medium
	Ideational	High	Medium	Low
	Behavioral	High	Medium	Medium

The table indicates the extent of Turkey's middle power role in the regional and global nexus in material, ideational and behavioural dimensions.

References

- Abbondanza, G., & Wilkins, T. S. (2022). The case for awkward powers. In G. Abbondanza & T. S. Wilkins (Eds.), *Awkward powers: Escaping traditional great and middle power theory*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Aral, B. (2004). Fifty years on: Turkey's voting orientation at the UN General Assembly, 1948–97. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 40(2), 137–160.
- Aral, B. (2022). Turkey's voting preferences in the UN General Assembly during the AK Party era as a counterchallenge to its 'new' foreign policy. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 25(3), 399–439. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2022.2143852>
- Aydın, U. (2021). Emerging middle powers and the liberal international order. *International Affairs*, 97(5), 1377–1394. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab153>
- Aydın-Düzgüt, S. (2023). Authoritarian middle powers and the liberal order: Turkey's contestation of the EU. *International Affairs*, 99(6), 2319–2337. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iad225>
- Carr, A. (2014). Is Australia a middle power? A systemic impact approach. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 68(1), 70–84.
- Cline, R. S. (1977). *World power assessment: A calculus of strategic drift*. Westview Press.
- Cooper, A. F., & Dal, E. P. (2016). Positioning the third wave of middle power diplomacy: Institutional elevation, practice limitations. *International Journal*, 71(4), 516–528.
- Cooper, D. A. (2011). Challenging contemporary notions of middle power influence: Implications of the Proliferation Security Initiative for "middle power theory." *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 7(3), 317–336.
- Dag, R. (2022). Geopolitical struggle between Russia and Turkey: The intersection of Ukraine and Syrian crises. *The Rest: Journal of Politics and Development*, 12(2), 150–161.



Efstathopoulos, C. (2021). Southern middle powers and the liberal international order: The options for Brazil and South Africa. *International Journal*, 76(3), 384–403. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00207020211042915>

Eralp, A. (2009). "The Role of Temporality and Interaction in the Turkey-EU Relationship", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 40, pp. 149-170.

European Commission (2005). *Turkey 2005 progress report*. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/07735786-3baa-4304-aeb1-3aaa321e24d3_en?filename=sec_1426_final_progress_report_tr_en.pdf (Accessed May 20, 2025)

European Commission (2008). *Turkey 2008 Progress Report*, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/turkey-progress-report-2008_en (Accessed: May 20, 2025)

European Commission. (2009). *Turkey 2009 progress report*. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/turkey-progress-report-2009_en (Accessed May 20, 2025)

European Commission. (2012). Turkey-EU positive agenda, enhanced EU-Turkey energy cooperation. https://energy.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2014-10/20120622_outline_of_enhanced_cooperation_0.pdf (Accessed May 20, 2025)

European Commission. (2015). EU-Turkey joint action plan, fact sheet. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/memo_15_5860/MEMO_15_5860_EN.pdf (Accessed May 20, 2025)

European Commission. (2016). *Turkey 2016 report*. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/e703a769-bf7f-46d1-8a13-6a836683e838_en?filename=20161109_report_turkey.pdf (Accessed May 20, 2025)

European Council. (2016). EU-Turkey statement on migration, press release. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/> (Accessed May 20, 2025)

European Commission. (2017). Fifth report on the progress made in the implementation of the EU-Turkey statement, Brussels, 2.3.2017 COM (2017) 204 final. https://www.ikv.org.tr/images/files/fifth_report_on_the_progress.pdf (Accessed May 20, 2025)

European Commission. (2022). *Türkiye 2022 report*. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ccedfba1-0ea4-4220-9f94-ae50c7fd0302_en?filename=T%C3%BCrkiye%20Report%202022.pdf (Accessed May 20, 2025)

European Commission. (2024). *Türkiye 2024 report*. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/turkiye-report-2024_en (Accessed May 20, 2025)

Gök, G. O., & Karadeniz, R. F. (2018). Analysing "T" in MIKTA: Turkey's changing middle power role in the United Nations. In E. Parlar Dal (Ed.), *Middle powers in*



global governance. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-72365>

Herzog, M., & Robins, P. (2014). The role, position and agency of cusp states in international relations. *Third World Quarterly*, 35(9), 1526–1541. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2014.976129>

Hynd, A. M. (2025). Repositioning middle powers in international hierarchies of status and order. *International Relations*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178251319723>

Jordaan, E. (2003). The concept of a middle power in international relations: Distinguishing between emerging and traditional middle powers. *Politikon*, 30(1), 165–181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0258934032000147282>

Jordaan, E. (2017). The emerging middle power concept: Time to say goodbye? *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 24(3), 395–412. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2017.1394218>

Karadeniz, R. F., & Oğuz Gök, G. (2019). Middle power diplomacy in theory and practice. *Turkish Journal of International Relations*, 18(1), 45–62.

Karadeniz, R. F., & Oğuz Gök, G. (2024). Searching for a place in global IR through exceptionalism: Turkey and the Mediation for Peace initiative. *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace*, 13(2), 260–284. <https://doi.org/10.20991/allazimuth.1505836>

Kaya, H. (2020). *The EU-Turkey statement on refugees: Assessing its impact on fundamental rights*. Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Kaya Uyar, S., & Sezgin, F. S. (2024). Türkiye's UN peacekeeping contributions as instruments of foreign policy amidst global transformations. In *TÜBA Academy Report* (Chapter 18). <https://doi.org/10.53478/TUBA.978-625-6110-04-5.ch18>

Kirişçi, K. (2014). *Syrian refugees and Turkey's challenges: Going beyond hospitality*. Washington, DC: Brookings.

Kutlay, M., & Öniş, Z. (2021). Understanding oscillations in Turkish foreign policy: Pathways to unusual middle power activism. *Third World Quarterly*, 42(12), 3051–3069. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.1985449>

Mo, J. (2017). South Korea's middle power diplomacy: A case of growing compatibility between regional and global roles. *International Journal*, 71(4), 587–607. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702016686380>

Müftüler-Baç, M. (2005). Turkey's political reforms and the impact of Europeanization. *South European Society and Politics*, 10(1), 17–31.

Müftüler-Baç, M. (2016). Turkey's ambivalent relationship with the European Union: To accede or not to accede. *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, 13(52), 89–103.

Nolte, D. (2010). How to compare regional powers: Analytical concepts and research topics. *Review of International Studies*, 36(4), 881–901. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021051000135X>



Nye, J. S., Jr. (2011). *The future of power*. New York: PublicAffairs.

Nolte, D., & Schenoni, L. L. (2024). To lead or not to lead: Regional powers and regional leadership. *International Politics*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-021-00355-8>

Öniş, Z. (2003). Domestic politics, international norms and challenges to the state: Turkey-EU relations in the post-Helsinki era. *Turkish Studies*, 4(1), 9-34. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/714005718>

Öniş, Z., & Kutlay, M. (2016). The dynamics of emerging middle-power influence in regional and global governance: The paradoxical case of Turkey. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2016.1183586>

Öniş, Z., & Kutlay, M. (2021). The anatomy of Turkey's new heterodox crisis: The interplay of domestic politics and global dynamics. *Turkish Studies*, 22(4), 499-529.

Öniş, Z. (2023). Historic missed opportunities and prospects for renewal: Turkey-EU relations in a post-Western order. *Turkish Studies*, 24(3-4), 691-713. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2023.2168192>

Özer, Y. (2015). AB'ye üyelik sürecinde Türkiye'de demokratikleşme. *Marmara Avrupa Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 23(2), 143-168.

Özer (2020). Modernising the EU-Turkey customs union as an interest-driven initiative, *Ankara Avrupa Çalışmaları Dergisi*, 19 (1), 175-197.

Parlar Dal, E., & Dipama, S. (2024). Assessing the diffusion of military power capacity of middle powers: The case of Turkey. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 27(4), 530-558. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2024.2414166>

Parlar Dal, E., & Kurşun, A. M. (2018). Turkey's global governance strategies at the UN compared to the BRICS (2008-2014): Clarifying the motivation-contribution nexus. *Perceptions*, 23(2), 109-134.

Robertson, J., & Carr, A. (2023). Is anyone a middle power? The case for historicization. *International Theory*, 15(3), 379-403. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S175297192300010>

Saatçioğlu, B. (2019). The European Union's refugee crisis and rising functionalism in EU-Turkey relations. *Turkish Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2019.1586542>

Sarı, B., & Sula, İ. E. (2024). Turkish foreign policy in a transforming world order: Middle power strategies and prospects. *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs*, 29(1), 4-23.

Sarı Ertem, H., & Karadeniz, R. F. (2019). Lost In Translation: A System-Level Analysis of the Turkish-U.S. Alliance under the Obama and Trump Administrations. *PERCEPTIONS: Journal of International Affairs*, 24(1), 7-38.

Sever, M., & Oğuz Gök, G. (2016). The UN factor in the regional power role and the Turkish case in the 2000s. In *The UN and emerging powers* (pp. 18-29)



Sofos, S. A. (2022). Turkey as mediator. *The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform*. https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/119754/1/Turkey_as_a_Mediator.pdf (Accessed April 2024)

Soyaltin-Colella, D., & Demiryol, T. (2023). Unusual middle power activism and regime survival: Turkey's drone warfare and its regime-boosting effects. *Third World Quarterly*, 44(4), 724–743. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2158080>

Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, R. (2011). A new sector in Turkish foreign policy: Mediation. *Boğaziçi Journal*, 25(2), 189–213.

Tüfekçi, Ö. (2025). Rising power activism vs great power statusquoism: Quest for a place in African power politics. *Uluslararası İktisadi ve İdari İncelemeler Dergisi*, 47, 267–282.

Tüzgen, N., & Oğuz Gök, G. (2024). Norm shaper, norm implementer, or norm antipreneur? Assessing Turkish foreign policy towards R2P. *Third World Quarterly*, 45(12), 1856–1875. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2024.2386053>

United Nations. (2017). *Financing the UN development system: Pathways to reposition for Agenda 2030*. <https://www.cbd.int/financial/un/un-dsfinancing2017.pdf>

Yanık, L. K. (2011). Constructing Turkish "exceptionalism": Discourses of liminality and hybridity in post-Cold War Turkish foreign policy. *Political Geography*, 30(2), 80–89.

World Bank. (2016). *Turkey: Country overview*. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/596391540568499043-0340022018/original/worldbankannualreport2016.pdf> (Accessed April 20, 2025)

INDIA'S TRANSITION FROM RULE-TAKER TO RULE-MAKER: ASPIRATIONS AND CHALLENGES

AMIT UPADHYAY

aupadhyay@jgu.edu.in

Associate Professor, Jindal Global Law School, O. P. Jindal Global University
Senior Fellow, Mahatma Gandhi Centre for Peace Studies, O. P. Jindal Global University (India).
ORCID: 0000-0003-1756-1499

ABHINAV MEHROTRA

amehrotra@jgu.edu.in

Associate Professor, Jindal Global Law School, O. P. Jindal Global University
Assistant Director, Centre for the Study of United Nations, O. P. Jindal Global University (India).
ORCID: 0000-0003-3146-8426

Abstract

India is increasingly shifting from being a passive “rule-taker” to an assertive “rule-maker” in global governance, driven by its rising economic and military capabilities and its growing role in shaping international norms leading to peace, justice, and strong governance at the global level. This transformation is marked by strategic autonomy and multi-aligned foreign policy undertaken by India, which allows it to engage with diverse partners, including Western powers and emerging economies, while retaining independent decision-making to balance its developmental priorities and goals. India’s participation in forums such as BRICS reflects its commitment to multilateralism and reforming global institutions to better represent a multipolar world and build inclusive societies. Simultaneously, its engagement with the major powers such as the US, Japan, and Australia through the QUAD highlights efforts to strategically counterbalance the Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific region, further strengthening its geopolitical clout. However, India’s global ambitions are tempered by internal challenges, including economic inequality, limited institutional capacity, regional tensions, democratic backsliding, religious populism, and arbitrary practices, which restrict its growth. In this context, the authors aim to focus on Indian foreign policy and its role in strengthening multilateral institutions, enhancing regional stability, and promoting economic growth internationally, as well as how it will influence the trajectory of global governance in the 21st century, for which it needs to align its internal functioning in accordance with the objectives of its foreign policy. India's ability to influence global governance will depend on how effectively it can balance these competing pressures at the domestic and international levels. Its success will define its future and shape the evolving international order, which is crucial in achieving global peace, security and a rule-based legal order in the current fragmented international order through global partnerships and reducing inequalities within its internal structures.

Keywords

India, Democracy, Peace, Justice, Security and Partnerships.



Resumo

A Índia está cada vez mais a passar de um papel passivo de «aceitante de regras» para um papel assertivo de «criadora de regras» na governação global, impulsionada pelas suas crescentes capacidades económicas e militares e pelo seu papel cada vez mais importante na definição de normas internacionais que conduzem à paz, à justiça e a uma governação forte a nível global. Essa transformação é marcada pela autonomia estratégica e pela política externa multialinhada adotada pela Índia, que lhe permite se envolver com diversos parceiros, incluindo potências ocidentais e economias emergentes, mantendo a independência na tomada de decisões para equilibrar suas prioridades e objetivos de desenvolvimento. A participação da Índia em fóruns como o BRICS reflete seu compromisso com o multilateralismo e a reforma das instituições globais para melhor representar um mundo multipolar e construir sociedades inclusivas. Simultaneamente, o seu envolvimento com as principais potências, como os EUA, o Japão e a Austrália, por meio do QUAD, destaca os esforços para contrabalançar estrategicamente a influência chinesa na região Indo-Pacífico, fortalecendo ainda mais a sua influência geopolítica. No entanto, as ambições globais da Índia são moderadas por desafios internos, incluindo desigualdade económica, capacidade institucional limitada, tensões regionais, retrocesso democrático, populismo religioso e práticas arbitrárias, que restringem o seu crescimento. Neste contexto, os autores pretendem centrar-se na política externa indiana e no seu papel no reforço das instituições multilaterais, na melhoria da estabilidade regional e na promoção do crescimento económico a nível internacional, bem como na forma como irá influenciar a trajetória da governação global no século XXI, para o que precisa de alinhar o seu funcionamento interno de acordo com os objetivos da sua política externa. A capacidade da Índia de influenciar a governança global dependerá da eficácia com que ela conseguir equilibrar essas pressões concorrentes nos níveis doméstico e internacional. O seu sucesso definirá o seu futuro e moldará a ordem internacional em evolução, o que é crucial para alcançar a paz global, a segurança e uma ordem jurídica baseada em regras na atual ordem internacional fragmentada, por meio de parcerias globais e da redução das desigualdades dentro das suas estruturas internas.

Palavras-chave

Índia, democracia, paz, justiça, segurança e parcerias.

How to cite this article

Upadhyay, Amit & Mehrotra, Abhinav (2025). India's Transition from Rule-Taker to Rule-Maker: Aspirations and Challenges. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 272-285. DOI <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.14>

Article submitted on 02nd June 2025 and accepted for publication on 29th September 2025.





INDIA'S TRANSITION FROM RULE-TAKER TO RULE-MAKER: ASPIRATIONS AND CHALLENGES

AMIT UPADHYAY

ABHINAV MEHROTRA

Introduction

Since its independence, India's foreign policy has significantly transformed, especially in the last two decades (Paul and Vinoda, 2024: 445-450). Historically, it has had a policy of non-alignment to uphold its independence in decision-making and, as a result, has largely not been part of global developments. However, India has evolved into a proactive member of the global community, particularly in international relations in the 21st Century, especially in its interactions with international institutions within the UN system, such as the UNGA, UNSC, ICJ, etc. (Mehrotra and Upadhyay, 2024: 295-308). This shift is evident through its active participation in multilateral platforms, strategic engagement with major powers, and vision for a reformed global order based on equity and responsibility through principles like Common But Differentiated Responsibility (CBDR) for which it had advocated vigorously, leading to a more inclusive global order. (Bhattacharya, 2024) The transformation is not merely a rhetoric; it reflects a broader change in India's perception of its role in the world, from a rule-taker to an aspirational rule-maker contributing towards sustainable development to enhance its position and achieve the aim of a developed India (Vyoma, 2021).

The transition of India from a passive "rule-taker" to an active "rule-maker" reflects its desire to actively shape global governance that aligns with its national interests and ideals (Verma and Li, 2025). This transition is driven by its growing military and economic capabilities and its contribution to emerging norms in international forums, and a dynamic approach to international rules and norms enables it to navigate the complex dynamics of global power structures. India's multi-alignment policy aims to engage with various power centres while bridging the gaps between East and West (Tandon and Slobodchikoff, 2024). The BRICS coalition provides a platform for India to collaborate with other emerging economies in its efforts to conduct reforms in multilateral institutions, ensuring that they reflect the realities of a multipolar world. (Kumar, 2022) Further, India has strengthened its bilateral relations with the United States and its allies in the Asian and Indo-Pacific regions, which have recently been impacted due to tariffs being imposed by the US (Singh et.al, 2025).



In general, India's proactive foreign policy and development-focused agenda resonates with other countries in the Global South, strengthening their ties and allowing them to voice their common concerns at international forums in ensuring equal access to justice for all (Singh et.al, 2025). However, India's global ambitions are tempered by internal challenges, including economic inequality, limited institutional capacity, regional tensions, democratic backsliding, religious populism, and arbitrary practices, which hinder India's transition to joining the high decision-making table internationally.

Despite the internal shortcomings, India seeks to assert its influence globally, wherein it faces the challenge of maintaining a delicate balance between competing powers. India's historical ties with Russia, juxtaposed with its growing strategic partnership with the US that has suffered recently, place it in a precarious position.

In this context, this paper explores India's aspiration to transition from a role of rule-taker to a rule-maker, which requires navigating a complex web of alliances, competing interests, and global challenges. It examines India's ability to sustain its balancing act between the BRICS coalition and Western alliances, while addressing pressing geopolitical issues as well as balancing internal imbalances, which will determine its future growth. This will be crucial in defining its role as a global power to form a more representative, accountable, and effective multilateral institution at global and regional levels through strategic global partnerships and to reduce inequalities within its internal systems.

Historically, Indian foreign policy has undergone three phases, ranging from one being rooted in morality and idealism, which marked the first important phase starting in 1947 and lasting till 1961. Through its belief in the Non-Aligned Movement, several issues were brought to the forefront, including decolonisation, sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference in the internal affairs of any nation, the peaceful co-existence of all nations and the broader democratization efforts in the context of the UN, including prohibition of nuclear weapons, peaceful settlement of disputes, and anti-apartheid efforts (Majumdar, 2024).

After the India-China War in 1962, the second phase was initiated, which was marked by a gradual shift in the approach towards strategic autonomy towards multi-alignment. This phase was described as 'regime shifting' or 'parallel institutionalisation' from an international relations lens (Mallavarapu, 2025). There were two main reasons for this shift. Firstly, India no longer believed in the capability and impartiality of the UN system. Second, after being denied equal status with other developed countries, it shifted its focus to the politics of the Third World countries, as it was better to be the representative of the Global South than to be a mere follower of the Global North (Nandy et.al, 2025). Finally, the third and most important period of India's role in multilateral institutions began in the post-Cold War era, when India opened itself to the world by bringing the LPG measures, which are Liberalisation, Privatisation, and Globalisation. In contrast to its principled and ideological approach to multilateralism in the past during the Nehruvian era, post-Cold War India is far more pragmatic and realistic in its foreign policy towards its attainment of joining the high decision-making table at the international level and overcoming its obstacles within the country.



The period was also accompanied by the concentration of power in the executive, which weakens institutional checks, the separation of powers among the legislative, executive and judiciary, followed by efforts to curtail the space for dissent, and through the use of majoritarian mandates with the aim of overhauling plural commitments, suggesting a form of electoral authoritarianism (Nartok, 2023). Such a state of affairs has affected the credibility in several matters of global concern, wherein both the civil-political and socioeconomic rights of the citizens have been violated. Despite its commitments to international frameworks, domestic policies often fail to address vulnerabilities faced by marginalised communities, especially on the basis of religion, caste and regional imbalances. In effect, the weakening of pluralist democracy directly translates into violations of citizens' rights to life, health, equality, and security, exposing the global implications of India's internal democratic decline.

Thus, this paper analyses the evolution of the foreign policy of India through the lens of strategic autonomy, multilateralism, and through its ability to represent the developing countries and the Global South, as well as being able to balance the relations with the West. It argues that India's transition must be understood within a changing geopolitical order, power imbalances, protectionist tendencies, and domestic political requirements in light of its aim to become a developed country both economically and politically. The analysis focuses on the role played by India in international platforms such as the G20, BRICS, and the QUAD to demonstrate how it seeks to shape global governance norms while safeguarding its national interests with an aim to promote peace and justice domestically and internationally.

In this light, the article throws light on the Nehruvian approach to international relations; India's participation in multilateral forums; India's engagement in the Asian and the Pacific region (Junuguru, 2025); along with its leadership role in the Global South, and finally, the challenges it faced both domestically and internationally in its pursuit of becoming a rule-maker from a rule-taker.

From Nehruvian Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy

The roots of India's foreign policy were laid post-independence by its first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who advocated for non-alignment and peaceful coexistence as the most important pillars regarding India's engagement with the world so as to protect its newly found independence and not be clubbed with any power bloc. This approach was rooted in anti-colonial solidarity and a commitment to the sovereignty of nations and the principle of non-intervention. However, in the early 1990s, economic liberalisation, accompanied by the Soviet Union's dissolution and the end of the Cold War hostilities, resulted in a unipolar world and US hegemony, necessitating a reform of India's foreign policy strategy. (Mehta, 2009:209-233) Thereafter, India needed to recalibrate its diplomatic and foreign policy engagements to transition towards strategic realism in an increasingly multi-polar world.

As a result, strategic autonomy emerged as a substitute for non-alignment, allowing India to engage with various power centres in the West and be aligned with the needs and demands of the Global South. In contrast to non-alignment, which implied neutrality towards power blocs, strategic autonomy is a more flexible policy. It allows India to



diplomatically navigate its relations with major global powers such as the United States, China, France, Russia and the United Kingdom without exclusively aligning itself with any bloc or being bound by their ideological commitments. Strategic autonomy is both a continuation and a contrast with the earlier Indian foreign policy. It allows India to focus on bilateral ties across political, economic, and security domains, such as in the case of QUAD and India's energy cooperation with Russia, which has been a matter of discussion since the Ukraine-Russia War (Vinodan and Kurian, 2024).

This approach reflects a pragmatic evolution shaped by the geopolitical shifts and domestic priorities requiring it to balance its ideological roots with the evolving multipolar world order to remain aligned with the changing global dynamics of diplomacy. The path of strategic autonomy has its challenges for India due to the balancing act needed to navigate the partnerships in the multipolar world, while catering to its vulnerabilities, such as energy dependencies requiring vast amounts of energy imports. The regional instability also affects India's resources and efforts to spread its influence beyond its neighbourhood (Pant and Super, 2015:747-764). including its strained relationship with its neighbours, including Pakistan, Bangladesh and China. At the same time, domestic challenges such as the rise of religious extremism and the push to uniformise personal laws to pursue the aim of a Uniform Civil Code further complicate its strategic aspirations, given the diversity of cultures that form the idea of India as a country (Upadhyay and Mehrotra, 2023: 198-211). The attempt to impose a unified normative framework in a society historically shaped by varying cultures undermines the very democratic values that set India apart from others in the global community. It will result in weakening the credibility of India's claims as the world's largest democracy, which is committed to equality and fraternity and is secular in its approach. In effect, the credibility of India's strategic aspirations cannot be separated from its internal governance issues. A plural, inclusive, and democratic India strengthens its claim to leadership in a fragmented world to lead the way as the world's largest democracy.

Despite the persisting challenges, India's ability to adapt to global shifts and strengthen the multilateral framework while defending its interests is pivotal in shaping 21st-century geopolitics to build representative and accountable multilateral institutions that help create an inclusive and peaceful society and ensure access to justice for all, both at the municipal and international levels.

India as a rule maker in multilateral forums

India's aspiration to become a rule-maker manifests through its active participation in several multilateral institutions at the regional and international levels. Historically, at the United Nations, India has advocated for reforms in the functioning of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to reflect the realities of a multipolar world in ensuring peace and security and move away from the 1945 composition that regarded the Permanent Five (P5) members as supreme (Atwal, 2025). To illustrate, as a member state of the G20, India has argued for inclusive development, climate justice, and reforms in international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to raise the issues faced by the developing countries and the lease



developed countries which was also the case with its presidency of the same when it invited the African Union to join G20 (Jindal and Kumar, 2025).

The change in India's approach towards the G20 can be best interpreted and understood through the systemic and domestic levels, as India has increasingly taken a more proactive role in multilateral institutions. It has resulted in an endeavour to deliver on global commons, specifically evident in the case of Climate Change Negotiations, wherein it seeks to integrate it into domestic laws and policy while balancing the need for economic development and poverty reduction with environmental protection. Nonetheless, these policies have faced obstacles domestically due to arbitrary practices of the executive organ of the government, which has resulted in the absence of adaptation and mitigation towards climate disasters as well as a lack of early preparedness, reflecting a gap between theoretical ambitions and practical realities. The implications of such governance gaps are multifaceted as India remains one of the world's most vulnerable nations to climate change, facing recurring floods, cyclones, and droughts that disproportionately impact marginalised communities. As the Global climate diplomacy increasingly demands synergy between international commitments and domestic action (Upadhyay and Mehrotra, 2024). In this context, the inability to institutionalise adaptation mechanisms affects India's normative position as a leader of the Global South advocating for climate justice.

Despite the obstacles, India has always advocated for the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) as this principle acknowledges the historical responsibility of industrial and developed nations owing to their contributing to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions at various multilateral forums, including the BRICS, which was also positively reflected in the recent advisory opinion on Climate Change by the ICJ (Solomon, 2024). This principle has been central to India's climate diplomacy, emphasising the need for equity in addressing climate change. Being a developing country, India has consistently championed the rights of poorer countries in international climate negotiations, advocating for climate justice and equality-based shared responsibilities (Stahlke, 2023).

In this regard, the presidency of India at the G20 in 2023 was a watershed moment. The theme "One Earth, One Family, One Future" highlighted India's renewed emphasis on *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (Chaturvedi et al., 2023), which means the world is one family rooted in ancient Indian philosophy. (Cooper, 2023) Through its G20 presidency, India put forth issues like digital public infrastructure, debt relief for the Global South, climate justice, and sustainable development.

Similarly, within BRICS, India has advocated for South-South cooperation and alternative financial architectures, such as the New Development Bank (Duggan et al., 2021: 495-511). While the utility of BRICS has often been questioned, India's engagement with the bloc reflects its attempt to build consensus within developing countries to challenge the Western dominance of multilateral institutions.



The Indo-Pacific and strategic balancing

Coming to the Asian and Pacific region, the strategic engagement of India in the Indo-Pacific exemplifies its growing geopolitical ambitions to take its place in the global order. The Indo-Pacific holds special significance for India, as it seeks to balance China's growing influence and secure its maritime interests that have threatened international peace and security. (Loc, 2023) Within this region, initiatives like the QUAD, which includes India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, demonstrate their willingness to collaborate with like-minded countries to uphold a rule-of-law-based order. Nonetheless, India is making efforts to ensure that it is seen as part of an anti-China alliance, especially given the recent geopolitical tensions with the US, as its strategy focuses on inclusivity and freedom of navigation while retaining space for bilateral engagement with China. This balancing act is symbolic of India's strategic autonomy, which allows India to consider multiple options, manage regional tensions, and assert its leadership independent of its deteriorating relationship with other countries, as well as garner support in situations where internal issues face challenges and criticism at an international level, especially territorial issues with China and Pakistan involving the regions of Kashmir and Ladakh (Aryal and Nair, 2025: 157-178).

Thus, considering the evolving China-US ties and shifting power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region, India continues to follow a 'balanced strategy,' despite being part of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Tran et.al, 2025). Furthermore, India's continue to engage with China through institutions such as BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and G20, as well as its enhanced trade with China and Russia, manifests the pursuit of a balancing strategy in its ties with other major powers that has irked the Western allies and regional organizations such as the EU continue to impose sanctions on Russia. At the same time, India affirmed its support for regional organisations like ASEAN at the centre of its goals for the Indo-Pacific region, as it acknowledged the new order and aligned with their strategy to respect the territorial sovereignty of Myanmar and not to interfere in its internal affairs (Ghosh, 2024).

Thus, given the region's growing geopolitical complexities and power rivalries, strategic autonomy allows India to make decisions that best align with its national interests and ensure its long-term security, especially with states with which it shares borders, like Myanmar. As analysed, India seeks to continue with its strategic autonomy by avoiding over-dependence on any single power while actively engaging with the various countries in the Indo-Pacific region. By maintaining its independence and advocating for its interests, India has contributed to a multi-polar order in the region by engaging in significant multilateral institutions and initiatives, such as ASEAN and QUAD, to promote dialogue, cooperation, and a rule-based order. Its approach ensures and prevents any single country from dominating the region by enhancing regional stability, encouraging a collaborative approach to everyday challenges, and helping to provide balanced power sharing within the larger Southeast Asian region.

India and the Global South: reclaiming moral leadership

India's foreign policy discourse, which has focused on strategic autonomy as well as the commonalities that it possesses with other countries in the Global South, has facilitated



its claim towards a leadership role within the Global South nations despite following a dual policy of supporting both developed, developing and least developed countries. From the historical solidarity of the Non-Aligned Movement to its current advocacy for a more equitable global order, India has consistently sought to position itself as a voice for developing countries (Kumar, 2022: 426-439).

In the 21st century, this aspiration is translated into developmental programs, strategic partnerships, and capacity-building programs that reflect developing countries' needs, aspirations, and global vision. The demonstrations of India's regional and global leadership have recently occurred amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. India, through its diplomatic efforts and initiatives such as the "*Vaccine Maitri*" (Vaccine Friendship) initiative, supplied millions of domestically manufactured COVID-19 vaccines to many countries in Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and other parts of the world. (Singh et.al, 2022) This initiative portrayed India's soft power capabilities and solidified the principle of South-South cooperation through mutual support and partnership.

Through these humanitarian solutions, India seeks to distinguish itself from traditional donor countries as it presents itself as an equal partner. This aligns closely with India's foreign policy principles of non-intervention, mutual respect, and strategic autonomy. Such an approach resonates with countries in the Global South looking for alternatives to Western development models that have led to the formation of Mini lateral organisations such as BRICS, SCO, etc. (Dash, 2008).

At the same time, India's efforts are not without their own set of challenges, as questions remain about how India's simultaneous pursuit of closer ties with Western powers, including participation in platforms like the QUAD, raises questions about how it balances its solidarity with the Global South with its evolving strategic alignments especially when the two blocs are at odds with each other as seen in the ongoing Ukraine and Gaza wars. As the geopolitical situation intensifies and multilateralism becomes more debated, India's ability to bridge between developed and developing countries is one of the most essential tools for navigating these challenges in building representative, effective and accountable institutions at the international level with the objectives of reducing violence, combating corruption and providing access to justice, and fostering inclusive decision-making processes.

Challenges to India's rule-maker aspirations

Despite India's growing stature as a global rule-maker and a representative and leader of the Global South, India continues to face various structural, strategic, and normative challenges both internationally and domestically that constrain its growth. These limitations highlight the gap that India's foreign policy needs to meet, which requires sustained reforms at the domestic level, coalition-building, and gaining international credibility. At the domestic level, the rise of a new regime under the *Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)* and the consolidation of power under Prime Minister Narendra Modi since 2014 have led to a more assertive, nationalistic, and ideologically driven approach to India's international interactions that have recently suffered setbacks, given the high rate of tariffs imposed by the US. In contrast to the Nehruvian doctrine of strategic restraint and multilateral idealism, the current government's leadership has instilled



confidence, economic pragmatism, and a desire for global recognition in India that has advanced its position as the fourth-largest economy in the world. However, India is facing many domestic challenges in the form of rising majoritarianism underlying the democratic fabric of the country, accompanied by religious extremism and arbitrary practices in the form of allegations of corrupt electoral practices, instances of mob lynching, and denial of labour rights to inter-state workers. Despite achieving economic growth consistently over several years, the per capita income remains significantly lower than that of major powers, reducing its economic advantage in multilateral organisations, given the high number of people below the poverty line. The uneven economic development, skill gap, and other developmental challenges adversely affect India's global competitiveness. The exodus of talent and the relatively less investment in research and development hamper India's innovation and technological leadership. (Abdul et al., 2023). Consequently, wide-ranging socio-economic disparities, persistent unemployment, and unstable health and education indicators further weaken the soft power potential that India seeks to project. Moreover, challenges include bureaucratic inefficiency and legal system delays, which impede the state's ability to act assertively on the global stage (Yadav, 2024).

Correspondingly, in the changing geopolitical order at the international level with the rise of an assertive China, the resurgence of the withdrawal of the United States from global multilateralism, especially evident as the Trump administration has come back to power, and the reconfiguration of power across regional blocs have led to a fragmented global order (Kassab et.al, 2025). As a result, emerging powers such as India are recalibrating their foreign policies, balancing strategic autonomy with a more assertive presence in institutions like the G20, BRICS, and the Indo-Pacific frameworks. In this context, the capacity of any one country with normative aspirations, like India, to shape global norms is significantly restricted without strategic alliances and sustained diplomacy.

This fragmented international framework has also led to a rebalancing of priorities among states. For example, climate change, global health, and cybersecurity have become new arenas of global rulemaking given the increasing instances of rights violations in these realms. India has taken significant steps in some of these domains by establishing the International Solar Alliance, i.e., an alliance of more than 120 signatory nations situated between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn (Ghosh and Chawla, 2021). Thus, this shift strengthens India's soft power appeal, particularly in the Global South, where decolonial and civilizational narratives relate strongly. By asserting itself as an alternative to Western models of modernity, India presents itself as a postcolonial power with Indigenous traditions that balance its historical civilisation ethos with the modern-day dilemmas.

However, India's pursuit of strategic autonomy, a foundational basis of its foreign policy since the Cold War, sometimes creates diplomatic ambiguity for international partners, as balancing between countries is a delicate task. India's cautious approach to the Russia-Ukraine war has been heavily criticised and used as a ground to impose additional tariffs by the US. While India's refusal to condemn Russia's invasion is rooted in historical ties, defence partnerships, and energy interests, it has led to the belief amongst Western nations of tacit acceptance (Nandy, 2024). While India's position is



consistent with its principle of non-alignment, it may appear to some as unwilling to uphold international norms on sovereignty and territorial integrity that are essential to maintain global peace, security and a rule-based world order. This balancing act has both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, it preserves India's autonomy in a fragmented world order; conversely, it can affect its credibility as a defender of international law norms. As India seeks greater influence in global institutions like the United Nations Security Council, G20, and World Trade Organisation, its consistent stand on various issues will be closely scrutinised by allies and adversaries to show its normative and principled commitment. Lastly, India's bilateral relationship with China remains one of its most formidable strategic challenges, along with Pakistan, especially given the recent Galwan attack that resulted in Operation Sindhoor. Although the relationship with China has shown improvement in light of the recent Tariffs imposed by the USA, the Line of Actual Control (LAC) disputes, especially the violent clash in Galwan Valley in 2020, have reignited tensions, eroded mutual trust, and reshaped India's foreign policy (Panda, 2021). In addition to unresolved border disputes, India faces a significant trade imbalance with China, further complicating economic ties. At the regional level, Beijing's penetration in South Asia, via its Belt and Road Initiative and increased influence in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and the Maldives, continues to challenge India's role as South Asian representative (Sharma and Cheetri, 2022: 458-475).

In this context, India must navigate a delicate balancing act with China. At the same time, both countries are members of multilateral platforms such as BRICS and SCO. Furthermore, India's closer ties with the United States, Japan, and Australia, particularly through QUAD, have heightened concerns for China. While India's aspirations to be a global rule-maker are based on its developmental achievements and normative discourse, the path forward must be carefully manoeuvred, considering structural, strategic, and geopolitical challenges as well as domestic challenges. To achieve its place at the international level, India must not only address domestic reforms and economic inclusion but also engage in consistent diplomacy, strengthen regional partnerships, and stick to a more coherent global narrative, which would enable India's vision of a multipolar, equitable world order to move from abstract to reality.

Overall, through its civilizational history and assertive pragmatism, India is developing a new narrative of its place in the world, which necessitates consistency (Kaura, 2024). However, maintaining this narrative on the global stage will require a careful balance between consistent policy and pluralist diplomacy. Whether India can navigate these challenges successfully will be a key determinant of its future as a credible and respected global power.

Conclusion and way forward

India's efforts to delicately balance the world powers while maintaining the issue-based coalitions with various countries have allowed it to maximise its national interests following the policy of strategic autonomy. This balancing act has taken place despite domestic constraints in the form of democratic backsliding, religious extremism and arbitrary exercise of power and persistent economic vulnerabilities, which often limit



India's growth. Nevertheless, India has sought to protect its sovereignty, retain its independence, and avoid being trapped in rigid alliances. The growing complexities in the fast-evolving multipolar world, in light of ongoing wars in various parts of the world and increasingly unstable regional dynamics, present significant challenges for India, compelling it to adapt its diplomatic and policy efforts to invest in domestic capacity building to increase its economic resilience while using its soft power to strengthen multilateral institutions, focusing on regional stability and global peace.

Thus, India's foreign policy trajectory reflects a complex and evolving interplay between ideology and pragmatism. As a rising power in a fragmented and increasingly multipolar world, India is engaged in the ambitious project of redefining its global role as a civilizational and strategic actor with global aspirations. India seeks to reconcile multiple tensions, which include strategic autonomy with multilateral alignment, civilizational identity, and normative leadership with the realities of the geopolitical world divided into multiple blocs or power centres.

As India engages actively in forums like BRICS, the Quad, the G20, and the SCO, while maintaining relationships with diverse countries such as the United States, France, Russia, and ASEAN, and pursuing significant developmental initiatives like the International Solar Alliance and *Vaccine Maitri*, it exemplifies how India is offering alternative models of global cooperation. However, India's rise is accompanied by challenges. Domestically, ensuring inclusive development and addressing socio-economic inequalities and the deficit in democratic structures will be critical, whereas internationally, India must navigate with China and the U.S.A. and continue to represent the interests of the Global South. Whether India can fully transition from a rule-taker to a rule-maker will ultimately depend on its capacity to project stable and inclusive leadership, while remaining responsive to the geopolitical constraints of the fragmented global order to contribute towards building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions domestically and globally. India's success will hinge on its capacity to institutionalise reforms domestically, sustain economic growth, and provide innovative solutions in areas such as climate governance and peacebuilding.

References

- Arshed, T., & Basu, P. P. (2024). The making of India's foreign policy: Elements and determinants. In P. P. Basu & T. Arshed (Eds.), *75 years of India's foreign policy*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-6054-1_2
- Aryal, S. K., & Nair, A. (2025). Division in Indo-Pacific strategy: An assessment of the Indo-Pacific strategies of India, Japan, the USA, and Australia. *East Asia*, 42, 157–178. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-024-09440-0>
- Atwal, J. (2025). India and the world: Indian national movement, transnational networks and internationalism. *Studies in History*, 40(1), 7–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02576430251314028>
- Bhattacharya, S. B. (2024). Revisiting India–West Asia relations: An analysis of strategic proximities. In P. P. Basu & T. Arshed (Eds.), *75 years of India's foreign policy*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-6054-1_8



- Bradford, C. I., & Linn, J. F. (2012). A history of G20 summits: The evolving dynamic of global leadership. *Journal of Globalisation and Development*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.1515/1948-1837.1239>
- Cooper, A. F. (2023). Between rewards and risks: India as host of the 2023 G20 Summit. *India Quarterly*, 79(4), 476–487. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09749284231203307>
- Duggan, N., Ladines Azalia, J. C., & Rewizorski, M. (2021). The structural power of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) in multilateral development finance: A case study of the New Development Bank. *International Political Science Review*, 43(4), 495–511. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121211048297>
- Ghosh, A., & Chawla, K. (2021). The role of the International Solar Alliance in advancing the energy transition in Asia. In N. Janardhanan & V. Chaturvedi (Eds.), *Renewable energy transition in Asia*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-8905-8_4
- Ghosh, D. (2024). India–ASEAN economic relations and North-east India: Act East policy as a new paradigm. *India Quarterly*, 80(2), 196–218. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09749284241241594>
- Goyal, N. (2024). The practice of international relations discipline in India: Obstacles and challenges. *Studies in Indian Politics*, 12(2), 336–345. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23210230241290884>
- Kaura, V. (2024). India's emerging geopolitics. In Z. Cope (Ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of contemporary geopolitics*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25399-7_61-1
- Majumdar, A. J. (2024). The evolving trajectory of India's foreign policy: Non-alignment to multi-engagement and beyond. In P. P. Basu & T. Arshed (Eds.), *75 years of India's foreign policy*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-6054-1_4
- Mallavarapu, S. (2025). Classical realism and Indian foreign policy: Some cautionary notes. *Studies in Indian Politics*, 13(1), 114–126. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23210230251324744>
- Mehrotra, A., & Upadhyay, A. (2024). India's approach towards adjudication before the International Court of Justice and International Criminal Court: In search of uniformity. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*, 15(2), 295–308. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.15.2.13>
- Mehta, P. B. (2009). Still under Nehru's shadow? The absence of foreign policy frameworks in India. *India Review*, 8(3), 209–233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736480903116750>
- Mishra, R. (2023). From non-alignment to multi-alignment: Assessing India's foreign policy shift. *The Round Table*, 112(1), 43–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2023.2165367>



Nandy, D. (2024). India and the United States in the Multiplex World: Engagements, Equations and Complexities. In: Basu, P.P., Arshed, T. (eds) 75 Years of India's Foreign Policy. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-6054-1_5

Nartok, E. E. (2023). 'Hindu civilisation' in business: The World Hindu Economic Forum's intellectual project. *International Affairs*, 99(2), 495–513. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iad018>

Nayudu, S. K. (2020). India looks at the world: Nehru, the Indian Foreign Service & world diplomacy. *Diplomatica*, 2(1), 100–117. <https://doi.org/10.1163/25891774-00201009>

Pant, H. V., & Super, J. M. (2015). India's 'non-alignment' conundrum: A twentieth-century policy in a changing world. *International Affairs*, 91(4), 747–764. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12336>

Paul, T. V., & Vinodan, C. (2024). India and the great powers: Balancing and diplomatic engagement revisited—Introducing the special issue. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 11(4), 445–450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970241285199>

Sharma, S., & Chhetri, P. S. (2022). Nepal, China and 'Belt and Road Initiative': Prospects and challenges. *India Quarterly*, 78(3), 458–475. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09749284221108262>

Singh, B., Singh, S., Singh, B., & Chattu, V. K. (2022). India's neighbourhood vaccine diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic: Humanitarian and geopolitical perspectives. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 58(6), 1021–1037. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096221079310>

Stahlke, T. (2023). Climate policy and the concept of co-benefits in India. *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, 25, 86–102. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40847-023-00235-2>

Tandon, A. A., & Slobodchikoff, M. O. (2024). Cooperation between India and the BRICS: A challenge to the global liberal order. In J. P. Ramey Jr. & S. D. Bakich (Eds.), *The sources of great power*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Upadhyay, A., & Mehrotra, A. (2023). Child marriage, Sexual abuse, and Muslim personal law: Contestations around the age of consent in marriage in the wake of the Uniform Civil Code debate in India. *Manchester Journal of Transnational Islamic Law & Practice*, 19(4), 198–211.

Upadhyay, A., & Mehrotra, A. (2024). Need for a human rights-based approach to climate change adaptation and mitigation with reference to the state of Uttarakhand in India. In Ş. N. Açikalin & Ş. Ş. Erçetin (Eds.), *The Social Consequences of Climate Change: Debates in Research and Policy* (pp. xx–xx). Emerald Insight.

Verma, R. (2023). India's quest for security and its neutrality in the Russia–Ukraine war. *The Round Table*, 112(1), 14–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2023.2165304>

Vinodan, C., & Kurian, A. L. (2024). Strategic autonomy and India's hedging policies in the Indo-Pacific. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 11(4), 475–493.

DANCING WITH GIANTS: INDONESIA AND ITS INCLUSIVE APPROACH IN THE INDO-PACIFIC AFTER BRICS ACCEPTANCE

MANSUR JUNED

mansurjuned@upnvj.ac.id

Associate Professor in International Relations at Universitas Pembangunan Nasional Veteran
Jakarta (Indonesia) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0386-7676>

MOHAMAD HERY SARIPUDIN

mohamad.hery.saripudin@unpad.ac.id

Assistant Professor in International Relations at Universitas Padjadjaran (Indonesia).
Senior Indonesian Diplomat and Former Ambassador to Kenya, <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4506-888X>

Abstract

The growing multipolarity in global politics has prompted emerging powers to utilise regional and international organisations as strategic tools to navigate major power rivals. This article investigates how Indonesia uses an inclusive approach in the Indo-Pacific through its membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and BRICS and its membership proposal for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) amid the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific region. This study addresses the key question of how Indonesia capitalises on ASEAN leadership and BRICS membership to enhance its OECD membership proposal and geopolitical standing. The investigation is anchored on neorealism in analysing regional power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific as Indonesia's response through its inclusive approach. This study employed qualitative research methods. The findings suggest that Indonesia's foreign policy doctrine of *Bebas Aktif* (independent and active) is not only aligned with, but also acts as a pivotal influence on ASEAN's inclusivity principles under the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Under these circumstances, Indonesia and other ASEAN members (AMS) engage in soft economic alliances, including BRICS and OECD, as a balancing act between the US and China. Additionally, Indonesia's BRICS membership enhances its bargaining power to pursue OECD membership, while maintaining cooperative relationships with the United States and its allies. This study contributes to understanding how emerging powers exercise dual alignment as a balancing act by using multilateral platforms to assert their influence and achieve strategic objectives in a multipolar world.

Keywords

Indonesia, Indo-Pacific, ASEAN, BRICS, OECD, Neorealism, Multipolarity, US-China Rivalry, *Bebas Aktif*.

Resumo

A crescente multipolaridade na política global levou as potências emergentes a utilizar organizações regionais e internacionais como ferramentas estratégicas para lidar com as principais potências rivais. Este artigo investiga como a Indonésia utiliza uma abordagem



inclusiva no Indo-Pacífico através da sua adesão à Associação das Nações do Sudeste Asiático (ASEAN) e ao BRICS, bem como da sua proposta de adesão à Organização para a Cooperação e Desenvolvimento Económico (OCDE), num contexto de rivalidade crescente entre os Estados Unidos e a China na região do Indo-Pacífico. Este estudo aborda a questão fundamental de como a Indonésia capitaliza a liderança da ASEAN e a adesão ao BRICS para reforçar a sua proposta de adesão à OCDE e a sua posição geopolítica. A investigação baseia-se no neorrealismo para analisar a dinâmica do poder regional no Indo-Pacífico como resposta da Indonésia através da sua abordagem inclusiva. Este estudo utilizou métodos de investigação qualitativos. As conclusões sugerem que a doutrina de política externa da Indonésia, Bebas Aktif (independente e ativa), não só está alinhada com os princípios de inclusão da ASEAN no âmbito da Visão da ASEAN sobre o Indo-Pacífico (AOIP), como também exerce uma influência fundamental sobre os mesmos. Nestas circunstâncias, a Indonésia e outros membros da ASEAN (AMS) envolvem-se em alianças económicas suaves, incluindo o BRICS e a OCDE, como um ato de equilíbrio entre os EUA e a China. Além disso, a adesão da Indonésia ao BRICS aumenta o seu poder de negociação para buscar a adesão à OCDE, mantendo relações de cooperação com os Estados Unidos e seus aliados. Este estudo contribui para a compreensão de como as potências emergentes exercem o duplo alinhamento como um ato de equilíbrio, usando plataformas multilaterais para afirmar a sua influência e alcançar objetivos estratégicos em um mundo multipolar.

Palavras-chave

Indonésia, Indo-Pacífico, ASEAN, BRICS, OCDE, Neorrealismo, Multipolaridade, Rivalidade EUA-China, Bebas Aktif.

How to cite this article

Juned, Mansur & Saripudin, Mohamad Hery (2025). Dancing with Giants: Indonesia and its Inclusive Approach in the Indo-Pacific after BRICS Acceptance. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 286-301. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.15>

Article submitted on 31st May 2025 and accepted for publication on 02nd September 2025.





DANCING WITH GIANTS: INDONESIA AND ITS INCLUSIVE APPROACH IN THE INDO-PACIFIC AFTER BRICS ACCEPTANCE

MANSUR JUNED

MOHAMAD HERY SARIPUDIN

Introduction

The 21st century is characterized by a global power shift from the Trans-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, as well as a shift in the global power dynamic towards a multipolar international system amid the decline of the rise of China, challenging the hegemonic power of the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) as the winner of the Cold War (Mearsheimer, 2014). This shift presents both opportunities and challenges for middle powers in the Indo-Pacific as the paramount stage of the intensifying rivalry between the US and the People's Republic of China (Bisley, 2020; White, 2010). In this context, middle powers, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, must recalculate their strategic alignment amid dynamic power shifts not only between the two superpowers of the US and China but also with international organisations. This is essential not only to survive in terms of the realist perspective but also to amplify their influence, safeguard their interests, and maintain strategic autonomy (Abbondanza, 2022; Chaisse & Hsieh, 2023; Cooper & Flemes, 2013; Juned & Sutiono, 2024).

Emerging powers, such as Indonesia, particularly those situated in strategically vital regions, such as Southeast Asia, find themselves at the confluence of these great power dynamics. They face the dual challenge of navigating the pressures emanating from major power competition while simultaneously seeking opportunities to enhance their geopolitical standing and pursue their national interests. In this context, regional and international organisations have become increasingly important. These multilateral platforms offer avenues for dialogue, cooperation, and the collective assertion of interests, providing smaller and middle powers with mechanisms to amplify their voices and manage the complexities of a multipolar world (Abbondanza, 2022; Acharya, 2014; Juned & Sutiono, 2024).

Indonesia, Southeast Asia's largest economy and a key archipelagic nation, is a prominent example of an emerging power actively shaping its regional environment. Its foreign policy tradition, encapsulated in the doctrine of *Bebas Aktif* (independent and active), emphasises a non-aligned yet proactive approach to international affairs (Anwar, 2020; Dannhauer, 2024). This doctrine has historically guided Indonesia's engagement



with the world, including its foundational role in the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN). More recently, Indonesia's strategic calculation embraced membership in the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, along with newly invited members) amid its pursuit of accession to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), as well as the US's negative sentiment towards members of the BRICS (Martin, 2025; Takahashi, 2024). Previously, Abbondanza (2022) and Juned & Setiono (2024) argue that Indonesia incorporates pragmatism in its contemporary application of *Bebas Aktif*, nuanced in an inclusive approach that allows it to actively engage with diverse economic cooperation with diverse actors, which is well reflected in its approach to the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific as well as the recently agreed EUI-CEPA agreement with the EU.

With further development by 2025, Indonesia was officially accepted as a member of BRICS on 6th January 2025 (Shofa, 2025). This milestone marks a new chapter in the nation's approach to navigating the complexities of the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in the context of its long-standing *Bebas Aktif* doctrine to 'dance with the giants' in the Indo-Pacific region. His new affiliation does not signify a shift away from Indonesia's non-aligned principles but rather an evolution of its strategy to actively engage with influential global actors to promote its interests and contribute to regional stability in the dynamic Indo-Pacific landscape. In this regard, Indonesia translates the doctrine of 'Bebas Aktif' into active engagement with two distinct global economic governance structures rather than being passive by not joining any economic regimes as a form of its strategic evolution of the non-alignment doctrine (Juned & Sutiono, 2024).

Indonesia is also pursuing permanent membership in the OECD, which is perceived as a Euro-American economic regime that promotes its economic standards (Maulana & Azis, 2025; Strangio, 2024). We perceive that it will generate further challenges for Indonesia in the coming years to strategically leverage its BRICS membership in its proposal to join the OECD and strengthen its position and inclusive approach in the region. In this regard, while BRICS membership opens opportunities for trade expansion and alternative funding, it will also attract opposition from the US and its allies towards Indonesia. In a recent case, Indonesia's BRICS membership has generated extra tariffs from the Trump administration-led US protectionist policy (Martin, 2025). On the other hand, the finalisation of the long-postponed EUI-CEPA shortly after Indonesia joined BRICS displays the opposing effect of how BRICS membership became its leverage to overcome the deadlock in the EUI-CEPA negotiation (Juned & Sutiono, 2024; Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2025). These two examples represent the challenges Indonesia faces in managing uncertainty amid the different interests and calculations of the related actors.

In this regard, we perceive that the discussion on how Indonesia utilises the BRICS membership as leverage for the OECD membership proposal, as well as navigating the Indo-Pacific's dynamics, cannot be separated from the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN)'s position in the region. In this regard, Indonesia, as a founder and dominant power in ASEAN, has powerful influences on regional organisations due to its population, GDP, and pivotal roles in shaping the official regional perspective of the Indo-Pacific region with the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) (Anwar, 2020). Recently, Indonesia became the first ASEAN country to be accepted into BRICS and was also



proposed for OECD membership (Shofa, 2025). Utilising ASEAN is essential in the power dynamics of the Indo-Pacific as it represents the major powers in the region without a hard alignment with either the US or China (Abbondanza, 2022; Chaisse & Hsieh, 2023). We perceive that Indonesia is leveraging its dominant influence in ASEAN to maximise the potential benefits of its inclusive approach to Indo-Pacific power dynamics and its proposal to join the OECD after its BRICS membership is accepted.

This study investigates how Indonesia utilises its leadership within ASEAN and its newfound membership in BRICS as leverage in the context of the OECD proposal amid the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. It seeks to answer the central research question: How does Indonesia utilise its position in BRICS as a power leverage in its bid for OECD membership amid the US-China rivalry? By adopting a neorealist theoretical lens and employing qualitative research methods, this study analyses Indonesia's diplomatic manoeuvring and its implications for regional stability and the broader international order (the West). This article argues that Indonesia strategically aligns its *Bebas Aktif* principle with ASEAN's inclusive framework, notably the AOIP, to foster diverse economic partnerships, including with BRICS and potentially with the OECD, thereby mitigating the pressure of great power competition. Furthermore, BRICS membership is posited as a tool to enhance Indonesia's bargaining position in its OECD aspirations while seeking to maintain constructive ties with the US and its allies.

Literature Review

Neorealism, or structural realism, posits that the anarchic nature of the international system is the primary determinant of state behaviour (Waltz, 1979). States, as rational and unitary actors, prioritise their survival and security in self-help systems. Power, primarily in material terms, is the key currency, and states constantly assess the balance of power to ensure their security (Mearsheimer, 2001). Although classical realism and neorealism agree on the state of anarchy between states, neorealism emphasises the systemic level of anarchy as the main determinant of state actions.

Neorealism has two distinct variants of offensive and defensive neorealism on perceiving how nation-states should act in an anarchical system (Juned & Sutiono, 2024). Offensive neorealism posits that under the system of anarchy, states should actively pursue relative power as an ultimate guarantee of survival instead of being defensive and waiting for alignment initiation from others. In this regard, this study uses Mearsheimer's offensive neorealism, which suggests that states seek to maximise their relative power to ensure survival, often through alliance formation and institutional participation (Mearsheimer, 2001). This perspective is essential for explaining Indonesia's strategic use of multilateral platforms to enhance its bargaining power amid the Indo-Pacific's shifting power dynamics. These actions are preceded by rational calculations to enhance security in a self-help world.

Indonesia's strategic engagement with multilateral platforms can be understood as a unique case of offensive realism, in which a middle power pursues its interests by initiating a dual alignment strategy for both superpowers rather than passively choosing one of the available alignments offered by the superpowers. By actively participating in



these organisations and using their membership as leverage, Indonesia strategically aimed to amplify its bargaining power over the superpowers and other middle powers of the region. This approach has allowed Indonesia to navigate complex Indo-Pacific power dynamics while preserving its strategic approach based on *Bebas Aktif*. In this regard, Indonesia uses multilateralism as a tool to advance its interests and ensure its security in a competitive international environment, instead of the use of bilateralism, which is not only less effective but also attracts biased perceptions from other actors. This strategic deployment of institutional participation underscores a calculated effort to maximise influence and maintain freedom of action, aligning with the core principles of offensive realism.

Indonesia's inclusive approach can be seen as a power balancing act aimed at mitigating vulnerabilities while maximising opportunities in a polarised Indo-Pacific system dominated by the US and China. Middle powers, such as Indonesia, can engage in power balancing with systemic powers. This involves strategic acts that are proportional to their capabilities and circumstances (Abbondanza, 2022). However, the inclusive approach has a different meaning than a balanced approach, as it focuses more on how Indonesia, as an actor in the regional structure, opens itself to cooperation with diverse actors according to existing circumstances rather than rigidly balancing itself, which would be difficult to calculate precisely.

In a multipolar system, such as the one emerging today, the distribution of power is more diffuse, with several major poles of influence. This can lead to more complex alliance patterns and potentially greater instability as states manoeuvre for advantage (Waltz, 1979). Neorealism suggests that emerging powers such as Indonesia seek to maximise their relative power and security. One way to achieve this is through strategic engagement with international and regional organisations. While neorealism traditionally views international institutions as secondary to power politics and often reflects the interests of great powers, they can also serve as arenas for balancing, signalling, and enhancing a state's influence (Mearsheimer, 1994).

For middle or emerging powers, these institutions can serve as tools to achieve several strategic objectives. First, aggregate power by forming coalitions or blocs: less powerful states can collectively exert greater influence than they can individually exert. Second, the Great Powers were constrained by the norms and rules within institutions. Third, enhancing status and legitimacy by achieving membership and leadership roles in recognised organisations can bolster a state's international standing. Fourth, diversifying dependencies by engaging with multiple platforms reduces reliance on a single source of power, thereby increasing strategic autonomy.

Indonesia's engagement with ASEAN, BRICS, and its pursuit of OECD membership can be interpreted through this neorealist lens as a strategic move to navigate the pressures of the US-China rivalry, enhance its own security and influence, and maintain its "independent and active" foreign policy stance in a system where power considerations remain paramount.



Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative investigation to thoroughly examine Indonesia's strategic engagement with ASEAN, BRICS, and its membership proposal for the OECD within the complex dynamics of the ongoing strategic competition between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific. By employing a qualitative research approach, this study constructs a robust framework for the nuanced exploration of intricate geopolitics and geoeconomics phenomena. This approach is essential for a deep understanding of the underlying motivations and strategic calculations that guide Indonesia's actions in navigating the complexities of a shifting global order. In this regard, Bryman (2016) argues that qualitative methodologies provide rich contextual understanding and in-depth insights into the social and political processes under study, making them relevant for investigating Indonesia's strategic manoeuvring in the Indo-Pacific. This research uses a wide range of qualitative data derived from policy documents, official statements, news coverage, and academic documents to provide a comprehensive understanding of Indonesia's inclusive approach.

This research uses diverse primary and secondary data in its investigation. The primary data sources in this research are relevant official government documents, statements, and reports from international organisations such as ASEAN, BRICS, and OECD. Furthermore, this research employs secondary data sources from academic literature, journal articles, and books, as well as reputable news analysis and commentaries. The data were selected based on their relevance and recency to the research topic. In selecting the data source, source bias and data source reflexivity, as well as the authors' reflexivity, were considered and acknowledged.

Furthermore, this study employs data triangulation from diverse data sources as the foundation for answering the research question and drawing conclusions. Data triangulation is essential to ensure the validity of the data amid potential bias due to data source reflexivity. Triangulation is also essential as the foundation of the analysis and drawing of research conclusions. This approach enables a rigorous examination of Indonesia's balancing act within the broader geopolitical context, facilitating a nuanced analysis of the interplay between Indonesia's strategic interests, regional power structures, and institutionalism (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Findings and Discussion

Indonesia's Foreign Policy: Bebas Aktif and ASEAN Centrality in Indo-Pacific

Bebas Aktif is the principal doctrine of Indonesia's foreign policy since its early independence amid the Cold War. *Bebas* (independent) signifies Indonesia's refusal to align with any global power block during the Cold War, while *Aktif* (active) underscores its commitment to proactively engage in the promotion and protection of world peace and justice (Anwar, 2020; Leifer, 1983). In the contemporary era, the implementation of *Bebas Aktif* has become more relevant and important as Indonesia's strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific has become the centre tenet of the global political



economy, characterised by the rivalry between the US and China (Anwar, 2020; Juned & Sutiono, 2024).

To navigate this power shift, the role of ASEAN, which has been the cornerstone of Indonesia's foreign policy since its establishment, became pivotal. As a founding member and the largest nation in the bloc, Indonesia has an essential leadership role in influencing the rules and norms within the regional organisation, including managing regional affairs and engaging with external powers (Haacke, 2005). In this regard, Indonesia's centrality in ASEAN is also well reflected in the fact that the ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC) is located in Jakarta, Indonesia, and in the formulation of the AOIP, which is also based on the *Bebas Aktif* foreign policy doctrine. This commitment is driven by the understanding that a stable and prosperous Southeast Asia is crucial to Indonesia's security and development.

Under President Joko Widodo's leadership (2014-2024), Indonesia adopted a more proactive and confident stance in its foreign policy engagements, a notable shift, while steadily adhering to its long-standing principle of non-alignment (Connelly, 2014; Irsadanar, 2023). Furthermore, under President Prabowo Subianto from 2024 to the present, Indonesia has tried to expand its influence as an official member of BRICS using the same approach as *Bebas Aktif's* foreign policy. Regardless of the actual evolution of the *Bebas Aktif* implementation, which is becoming more pragmatic, Indonesia remains consistent with this approach, including in the formulation of the AOIP, which has become the ASEAN main principle of inclusivity amid the power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. Through the AOIP, Indonesia, through ASEAN, promotes regional cooperation and stability based on inclusivity and leverages its influential position to foster dialogue and address shared challenges. Indonesia is scaling up this approach beyond ASEAN by actively participating in multilateral forums and constructively contributing to the global discourse. This enhanced international standing allowed Indonesia to play a prominent role in shaping regional norms and contributing to a balanced and inclusive Indo-Pacific order.

The AOIP, adopted in 2019, can be perceived as a manifestation of *Bebas Aktif* in a regional context that promotes inclusivity in the Indo-Pacific amid the tendency of polarisation (ASEAN, 2024). The AOIP emphasises principles such as inclusivity, dialogue, cooperation, and respect for international law, seeking to create an open and rule-based regional architecture to act as a bridge for the contesting powers of the region. It explicitly rejects the vision of a single superpower's dominion over the Indo-Pacific and instead promotes ASEAN-led mechanisms as a fulcrum for regional engagement. In the greater context, the AOIP's emphasis on inclusivity leverages the implementation of Indonesia's *Bebas Aktif* doctrine, allowing Indonesia to proactively engage in strategic alignment with the US and China without the obligation to engage in hard alignment. This framework enables ASEAN members, including Indonesia, to pursue soft economic alignment and diverse partnerships using their inclusivity-based foreign policy as bargaining power.

Using this approach, Indonesia constructively engages with both the US-based IPEF and China's Belt and Road Initiative without choosing sides. This approach is in line with the AOIP's four key areas of cooperation—maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable



development goals, and economic cooperation—that allow engagement with diverse partners (ASEAN, 2019). In this regard, Indonesia has demonstrated its inclusive approach to the Indo-Pacific by remaining cooperative with the tariff demands from the US and finalising the EUI CEPA with the EU following its BRICS acceptance (Juned & Sutiono, 2024). In the larger context, the AOIP, through its four primary areas of cooperation, also offers concrete avenues for collaboration with a wide array of regional and global partners, such as the AMS' dual proposal towards BRICS and OECD.

The Rise of BRICS and Indonesia's Strategic Engagement

The BRICS economic bloc, which was initially coined by Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill, has significantly evolved into a global economic bloc challenging the US-led economic regimes since its formation in 2001 (Goldman Sachs, 2001). It represents the Global South's collective aspiration to reshape aspects of global governance and provide alternative platforms for economic cooperation, financial funding, and forums for political dialogue, often perceived as challenging the Western-dominated international order (Stuenkel, 2020). The recent expansion of BRICS, with the acceptance of Indonesia in January 2025, signals its growing appeal and potential to influence global economic and political landscapes, particularly the emerging powers and the Global South, amid the intensifying trade wars initiated by the US under the Trump administration.

In this regard, Indonesia's decision to apply for permanent membership and its acceptance as a permanent member of BRICS can be analysed as a strategic act that is not only consistent with its *Bebas Aktif* foreign policy but also mandatory to preserve its autonomy in its external relations. Furthermore, from the perspective of neorealism, diversified partnerships are essential to enhance influence by increasing bargaining power with potential partners. In this regard, BRICS offers access to large and growing markets, investment opportunities, and alternative sources of development finance, such as the New Development Bank (NDB), which works as leverage for its members in their discussions with partners both from BRICS and beyond. BRICS also provides Indonesia with a more prominent platform to articulate its interests and contribute to shaping global norms and institutions alongside other major emerging powers. In the context of the US-China rivalry, BRICS membership offers Indonesia another avenue for engagement by using its BRICS-facilitated economic ties with China as leverage in the recent tariff negotiations of the US protectionist approach under the Trump administration, thereby reinforcing its non-aligned stance and increasing its room for manoeuvre (Faridz, 2024). Furthermore, BRICS aligns with Indonesia's long-standing commitment to solidarity and cooperation among developing nations.

Indonesia's inclusive approach to the Indo-Pacific, particularly in light of its acceptance of BRICS, showcases a strategic posture rooted in a neorealist understanding of middle-power behaviour within a multipolar world. Rather than aligning exclusively with any single bloc, Indonesia has strategically positioned itself to maximise its security and influence. This approach, supported by scholarship on middle-power diplomacy (Abbondanza, 2022; Schweller, 1994), underscores the preference for flexible partnerships over rigid alliances, allowing Indonesia to navigate the complexities of the multipolar system with greater agility. Its capacity to cultivate and sustain relationships



across various institutional frameworks highlights the enduring significance and practical application of non-alignment principles in the current landscape of international relations, thus demonstrating a nuanced and adaptable foreign policy strategy.

By joining BRICS, Indonesia adds another layer to its multifaceted diplomatic engagement and maximises its options and influence in a complex global environment. Furthermore, BRICS membership allows Indonesia to have alternative choices in its trading and economic partners in the era of protectionism under the Trump administration. It is essential to ensure the fulfilment of Indonesia's economic interests amid the more protectionist US, which significantly impacts the global economic order. Indonesia's decision to join BRICS, along with the OECD membership proposal, represents a strategic deepening and widening of its foreign policy, as well as a scaling up of the existing alignment. By embracing BRICS, Indonesia aims to enhance its capacity to navigate an increasingly dynamic power shift on a global scale by having a wider range of strategic choices and amplifying its international standing (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2025).

This expansion of partnerships is particularly significant in the context of evolving global economic power dynamics, as BRICS membership offers Indonesia alternative avenues for trade and economic cooperation amid the rising US-China rivalry and protectionism. This is essential to ensure Indonesia's economic resilience and secure its national economic interests through the diversification of its economic relationships in a disrupted global economic order characterised by more protectionist tendencies in major economies. In this regard, BRICS provides Indonesia with a platform to pursue its economic agenda and mitigate the risks associated with overreliance on traditional partners amid a shifting global economic paradigm.

Navigating the US-China Rivalry: Indonesia's Balancing Act through ASEAN and BRICS

The Indo-Pacific region is the epicentre of the strategic competition between the US and China. This rivalry manifests in various domains, including economic influence, technological dominance, military presence and diplomatic outreach (Mastanduno, 2019). Indonesia, located at the maritime crossroads of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, faces significant challenges and opportunities. The challenge lies in avoiding entanglement in great power conflicts that could destabilise the region and compromise its sovereignty. This opportunity lies in leveraging its strategic position and diplomatic acumen to foster a regional order that serves its interests. In this regard, we argue that Indonesia translates *Bebas Aktif* foreign policy into more pragmatic and interest-based foreign policies while maintaining its inclusive approach, as reflected in Anwar's (2020) research regarding AOIP and Juned and Setiono's (2024) EUI CEPA.

We argue that Indonesia employs a multipronged strategy to navigate this conflict. First, by strengthening ASEAN Centrality, Indonesia consistently champions ASEAN as the primary vehicle for regional cooperation and security dialogue. Through the AOIP, Indonesia seeks to ensure that the regional architecture remains inclusive and ASEAN-led, thereby preventing the dominance of any external power (Sukma, 2024). This allows



Indonesia and other ASEAN states to engage with both the US and China on their own terms based on shared regional norms. Second, Maintaining Equidistance: Consistent with *Bebas Aktif*, Indonesia strives to maintain a positive and balanced relationship with Washington and Beijing. It engages with US-led initiatives that align with its interests (e.g., the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), OECD, and tariff negotiations) while also deepening economic ties with China by joining BRICS, its largest trading partner, to scale up existing economic cooperation, such as the Belt Road Initiative and ASEAN Plus Three (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, various statements). Third, using BRICS as a counterweight and diversification tool, Indonesia's BRICS membership provides an additional platform for engagement independent of the US-China axis. From a neo-realist perspective, this diversifies Indonesia's partnerships and reduces its potential vulnerability to superpower pressure. This indicates that Indonesia has options and is not solely reliant on Western institutions or the Chinese economic regime. This can subtly enhance Indonesia's bargaining power with both major powers, as neither would want to see Indonesia drift too far into the other's orbit or become too closely aligned with the alternative bloc.

In the context of ASEAN and in the broader sense, Indonesia's strategic behaviour provides insights into how emerging powers are likely to navigate an increasingly multipolar international system. Rather than seeking exclusive alignment with particular power centres, countries such as Indonesia are pursuing portfolio approaches that maximise their strategic options. This trend has significant implications for both traditional alliances and international institutions in the region. As more countries adopt similar strategies, the international system may become characterised by overlapping and competing institutional frameworks rather than clear-cut alliances.

Leveraging BRICS for OECD Aspirations and Broader Engagement

Indonesia formally expressed its ambition to join the OECD, a group predominantly composed of developed economies committed to democratic principles and market economies (OECD, n.d.). Jakarta has seen OECD membership as a means of accelerating domestic reforms, attracting high-quality investments, and integrating Indonesia into the global economy based on high standards of governance and policy (Government of Indonesia, various statements). Indonesia's acceptance of BRICS does not necessarily cancel its proposal to join the OECD, but it is more of a leverage for Indonesia to enhance its relative power to join the economic group of developed nations.

The pursuit of OECD membership while being a member of BRICS might appear contradictory to some, given the different orientations of the two groups. However, from Indonesia's perspective, these are not mutually exclusive endeavours but rather complementary components of its strategy to enhance its international and economic development. In this regard, there are several strategic advantages for Indonesia to join BRICS in its proposal to join the OECD. First, BRICS as a Bargaining Chip leverages Indonesian negotiations with the OECD. This demonstrates Indonesia's significance as a major emerging economy with diverse economic partnerships. This could potentially expedite its accession process or provide it with a stronger negotiating position on certain



terms, as many OECD members are also keen to maintain the multilateralism approach regardless of the growing unilateralism in the contemporary global political economy.

Second, it signals that Indonesia remains committed to the OECD's economic standards based on those of developed nations. By pursuing OECD membership, Indonesia has signalled its willingness to adhere to the high governance, economic, and environmental standards promoted by the organisation. This can help allay Western partners' concerns regarding their engagement with BRICS, demonstrating that Indonesia remains committed to a rule-based international economic order. It also demonstrates Indonesia's consistent image of an inclusive approach to aligning strategic partnerships with actors outside ASEAN.

Third, Indonesia has tried to maintain respectful relations with the US and its allies. Indonesia's OECD bid is also a clear signal of its intent to maintain and deepen cooperative relationships with the US and its allies, many of whom are key OECD members. This balances its engagement with BRICS and reinforces its *Bebas Aktif* policy of constructively engaging with all major players. However, BRICS membership also adds a challenge for better rewards for Indonesia, as we cannot neglect the potential counterproductive impact of Indonesia joining BRICS. Regardless of its status as a BRICS member, its consistent efforts on its proposal, as well as the strategic political economic leverage of an ASEAN and G20 member, reinforce its clear tendency to be a 'bridge' between the two global economic regimes. As noted by Indonesian officials, the pursuit of OECD membership has received support from key Western countries (AntaraNews, 2024).

This dual engagement strategy allows Indonesia to maximise the benefits of different international platforms, reinforcing its image as a "norm entrepreneur" and responsible global citizen capable of bridging divides and fostering cooperation across different geopolitical and economic groupings. The analysis confirms the central proposition that Indonesia strategically leverages its position within ASEAN and its BRICS membership to navigate the complexities of the US-China rivalry and enhance its geopolitical standing in the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

This study examined how Indonesia leverages its pivotal role in ASEAN and its membership in BRICS to navigate the intensifying US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, guided by its *Bebas Aktif* foreign policy and viewed through a neorealist lens. This study suggests that Indonesia strategically uses these multilateral platforms to enhance its geopolitical standing, maintain strategic autonomy, and pursue national interests to mitigate the ongoing rivalry between the US and China, as well as the power dynamics among other middle powers.

Indonesia's commitment to ASEAN Centrality, particularly through the AOIP, provides a crucial framework for promoting an inclusive regional order. This allows Indonesia and other AMS to engage in diverse economic partnerships, including BRICS and the OECD, without being forced into exclusionary alignment by the nature of systemic anarchy based on the struggle for power. Furthermore, Indonesia's BRICS membership is strategically



utilised as a tool to bolster its bargaining power, particularly in its aspiration to join the OECD, while simultaneously seeking to maintain cooperative and respectful relations with the United States and its allies.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how emerging powers, such as Indonesia, are adapting their strategic foreign policy to an increasingly multipolar Indo-Pacific. In this regard, Indonesia is "dancing with giants" by engaging with superpowers, great powers, and other middle powers via its alignment with global and regional institutions. This approach underscores the enduring relevance of strategic hedging and the innovative use of multilateral diplomacy as tools for asserting influence and safeguarding national interests in contemporary global and regional power dynamics. However, due to the recentness of the issue, it is expected that future research could delve deeper into the specific mechanisms through which BRICS membership translates into tangible bargaining power for Indonesia in international forums. Additionally, comparative analyses with other middle powers such as Japan, Australia, or other AMS in navigating the existing condition could scale up the research topic for a country to draw a certain pattern of how middle powers navigate the evolving dynamics of global politics.

Indonesia's strategic behaviour offers valuable perspectives on how emerging powers are likely to operate within an increasingly multipolar international system. Rather than pursuing exclusive alliances with specific power centres, nations such as Indonesia are adopting portfolio strategies to optimise their strategic flexibility. This trend has profound implications for established alliance systems and international institutions. As more states implement analogous strategies, the international system may evolve into a complex network of overlapping and competing institutional frameworks rather than discrete alliance blocs.

However, Indonesia's inclusive approach requires consistent foreign policy implementation based on careful calculations to avoid negative impacts, such as the extra tariff implementation by the US after Indonesia joined BRICS. We perceive that a similar scenario could also occur in the case of the OECD membership proposal. In this regard, Indonesia should deploy a limited proactive approach based on the principles of *Bebas Aktif* according to existing circumstances and momentum in the region to avoid an over-progressive approach that will create counter-productive results to its actual interests.

Amid the recentness and contemporary dynamics of the Indo-Pacific and the global political economy, the research is limited to examining Indonesia's strategic use of its ASEAN leadership and recent BRICS membership to gain leverage in the OECD proposal amid the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific by mid-2025. Given the dynamic nature of the Indo-Pacific and global political economies, existing research on this specific interaction remains limited. Future research should delve deeper into the evolving power dynamics of the Indo-Pacific and the progress of the OECD membership proposal beyond 2025. Furthermore, the qualitative methodology of this study opens avenues for future quantitative and mixed-method approaches, as well as the application of diverse analytical tools.



References

- Abbondanza, G. (2022). Whither the Indo-Pacific? Middle Power Strategies from Australia, South Korea and Indonesia. *International Affairs*, 98(2), 403–421. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab231>
- Acharya, A. (2014). Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies. *International Studies Quarterly*, 58(4), 647–659. <https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12171>
- AntaraNews. (2024, May 16). *OECD Accepts Indonesia's Accession Bid: Minister* (A. Firdaus & R. Sulistiyandari, Trans.). <https://en.antaranews.com/news/313614/oecd-accepts-indonesias-accession-bid-minister>
- Anwar, D. F. (2020). Indonesia and the ASEAN Outlook on The Indo-Pacific. *International Affairs*, 96(1), 111–129. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz223>
- ASEAN. (2019). *2019 ASEAN's Outlook on The Indo-Pacific*. ASEAN Secretariat. <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/databasecil/2019-aseans-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific/>
- ASEAN. (2024). *ASEAN Outlook on The Indo-Pacific*. ASEAN Secretariat. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf
- Bisley, N. (2020). *Review of Contest for The Indo-Pacific: Why China Won't Map the Future*. Australian Foreign Affairs. <https://www.australianforeignaffairs.com/articles/review/2020/09/contest-for-the-indo-pacific/nick-bisley>
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social Research Methods* (Fifth Edition). Oxford University Press.
- Chaisse, J., & Hsieh, P. L. (2023). Rethinking Asia-Pacific regionalism and new economic agreements. *Asia Pacific Law Review*, 31(2), 451–468. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10192557.2023.2216056>
- Connelly, A. L. (2014, October 15). *Indonesian Foreign Policy under President Jokowi*. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/indonesian-foreign-policy-under-president-jokowi>
- Cooper, A. F., & Flemes, D. (2013). Foreign Policy Strategies of Emerging Powers in a Multipolar World: An Introductory Review. *Third World Quarterly*, 34(6), 943–962. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.802501>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2023). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Sixth edition). SAGE.
- Dannhauer, P. (2024). Elite role conceptions and Indonesia's agency in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific: Reclaiming leadership. *The Pacific Review*, 37(1), 30–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2125999>
- Faridz, D. (2024, December 13). Indonesia Still Eyes BRICS Membership Despite Trump Tariff Threat. *VOA News*. <https://www.voanews.com/a/indonesia-still-eyes-brics-membership-despite-trump-tariff-threat-/7901154.html>



- Goldman Sachs. (2001). *With the GS Research Report, "BRICs" Are Born*. Goldman Sachs. <https://www.goldmansachs.com/our-firm/history/moments/2001-brics>
- Haacke, J. (2005). *ASEAN's Diplomatic and Security Culture: Origins, Development and Prospects* (paperback ed). Routledge.
- Irsadanar, R. J. P. (2023). Indonesia's South China Sea Policy under Joko Widodo: Building Credibility in Indo-Pacific Geostrategic Circuit. *Jurnal Hubungan Internasional*, 12(1), 25–36. <https://doi.org/10.18196/jhi.v12i1.16188>
- Juned, M., & Sutiono, P. (2024). Discussion of Indonesia-EU Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement: European interest in Indo-Pacific and Bebas Aktif foreign policy. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10(1), 2417805. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2417805>
- Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia. (2025, January 7). *Pernyataan Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia Tentang Keanggotaan Indonesia di BRICS*. <https://kemlu.go.id/berita/berita/pernyataan-kementerian-luar-negeri-republik-indonesia-tentang-keanggotaan-indonesia-di-brics?type=publication>
- Leifer, M. (1983). *Indonesia's Foreign Policy*. The Royal Institute of International Affairs.
- Martin, N. (2025, July 8). Why is Donald Trump so afraid of BRICS? *DW*, [online].
- Mastanduno, M. (2019). Partner Politics: Russia, China, and the Challenge of Extending US Hegemony after the Cold War. *Security Studies*, 28(3), 479–504. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1604984>
- Maulana, A. R., & Azis, A. A. (2025). Considering Indonesia's Economic Growth Direction: Between the OECD and BRICS. *Journal of Social Research*, 4(7), 1536–1550. <https://doi.org/10.55324/josr.v4i7.2640>
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (1994). The False Promise of International Institutions. *International Security*, 19(3), 5. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539078>
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (1st ed.). Norton.
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (Updated Edition)* (1st ed). W. W. Norton & Company, Incorporated.
- OECD. (n.d.). *The OECD: Better Policies for Better Lives*. <https://www.goinginternational.eu/wp/de/the-oecd-better-policies-for-better-lives/>
- Schweller, R. L. (1994). Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In. *International Security*, 19(1), 72–107. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539149>
- Shofa, J. N. (2025, January 7). *Indonesia Officially Becomes BRICS Full Member, Vows to Be Active*. Jakarta Globe. <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/indonesia-officially-becomes-brics-full-member-vows-to-be-active>
- Strangio, S. (2024, February 28). Indonesia's Long and Winding Road to OECD Membership. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/indonesias-long-and-winding-road-to-oecd-membership/>



Stuenkel, O. (2020). *The BRICS and the Future of Global Order (2nd édition)*. Lexington books.

Sukma, R. (2024). "Do Not Be a Proxy": Indonesia, ASEAN and the Sino-US Rivalry. In D. Singh & H. T. Ha (Eds.), *Southeast Asian Affairs 2024* (pp. 127–138). ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute Singapore. <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789815203516-009>

Takahashi, T. (2024, August 12). *OECD or BRICS? Key Members' Differences Might Weaken ASEAN Unity*. Nikkei Asia. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/OECD-or-BRICS-Key-members-differences-might-weaken-ASEAN-unity>

Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. Addison-Wesley.

White, H. (2010). *Power Shift: Australia's Future Between Washington and Beijing*. Black Inc.

OVERLAPPING ORGANISATIONS AND EMERGING POWERS: INDIA'S SELECTIVE ENGAGEMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF FORUM SHOPPING

FATMA SEVER

fatma.sever@dest.smk.lt

Researcher, SMK College of Applied Sciences, Vilnius (Lithuania).

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8003-4996>

MEHMET RECAI UYGUR

mehmetrecai.uygur@smk.lt

Senior Researcher, SMK College of Applied Sciences, Vilnius (Lithuania).

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1872-0885>

Abstract

The post-WWII era gave rise to not only an expansion in international organisations but also in regional organisations, resulting in the proliferation of overlapping organisations at both the global and regional levels (Panke and Stapel, 2018; Reinsberg & Westerwinter, 2023). This overlapping phenomenon also opens a room for forum shopping that leads states to navigate themselves among different organisations according to their interest (Busch, 2007; Hofmann, 2018). India, as an emerging power, has a dual approach with committing to global organisations, while actively engaging with regional organisations. Hence, India actively participates in international organisations such as the UN and WTO, while simultaneously taking an active role in shaping regional institutions such as SAARC, BIMSTEC, and RCEP. Thus, the study contributes to overlapping organisations literature focusing on the forum shopping strategy to understand how India, as an emerging power, navigates itself between overlapping organisations to contribute to regional and global efforts while maximising its national interests. This paper argues that India's foreign policy behaviour reflects a strategic manoeuvre of forum shopping that selectively engages with overlapping organisations based on institutional design, membership, and issue-specific utility. The study employs process tracing since the early 1990s to map India's historical and strategic shifts in organisational engagement, such as the move from SAARC to BIMSTEC or its withdrawal from RCEP, to uncover the causal mechanisms and motivations behind India's institutional strategies. The findings demonstrate that India's foreign policy rationality is neither a retreat solely from multilateralism nor a simple alignment with major powers, but rather an adaptive strategy to advance national interests through institutional diversity and regional substitution.

Keywords

Overlapping regionalism, forum shopping, institutional balancing, regionalism, India.

Resumo

O período pós-Segunda Guerra Mundial deu origem não só a uma expansão das organizações internacionais, mas também das organizações regionais, resultando na proliferação de organizações sobrepostas, tanto a nível global como regional (Panke e Stapel, 2018; Reinsberg & Westerwinter, 2023). Este fenómeno de sobreposição também abre espaço para



a escolha do foro mais favorável, levando os Estados a navegar entre diferentes organizações de acordo com os seus interesses (Busch, 2007; Hofmann, 2018). A Índia, como potência emergente, tem uma abordagem dupla, comprometendo-se com organizações globais e, ao mesmo tempo, envolvendo-se ativamente com organizações regionais. Assim, a Índia participa ativamente em organizações internacionais como a ONU e a OMC, ao mesmo tempo que desempenha um papel ativo na formação de instituições regionais como a SAARC, a BIMSTEC e a RCEP. Assim, o estudo contribui para a literatura sobre organizações sobrepostas, com foco na estratégia de forum shopping, para compreender como a Índia, como potência emergente, navega entre organizações sobrepostas para contribuir para os esforços regionais e globais, maximizando os seus interesses nacionais. Este artigo argumenta que o comportamento da política externa da Índia reflete uma manobra estratégica de forum shopping que se envolve seletivamente com organizações sobrepostas com base no desenho institucional, na adesão e na utilidade específica da questão. O estudo emprega o rastreamento de processos desde o início da década de 1990 para mapear as mudanças históricas e estratégicas da Índia no envolvimento organizacional, como a mudança da SAARC para a BIMSTEC ou a sua retirada da RCEP, para descobrir os mecanismos causais e as motivações por trás das estratégias institucionais da Índia. As conclusões demonstram que a racionalidade da política externa da Índia não é nem um recuo exclusivo do multilateralismo nem um simples alinhamento com as grandes potências, mas sim uma estratégia adaptativa para promover os interesses nacionais através da diversidade institucional e da substituição regional.

Palavras-chave

Regionalismo sobreposto, forum shopping, equilíbrio institucional, regionalismo, Índia.

How to cite this article

Sever, Fatma & Uygur, Mehmet Recai (2025). Overlapping Organisations and Emerging Powers: India's Selective Engagement Through the Lens of Forum Shopping. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 302-319. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.16>

Article submitted on 01st June 2025 and accepted for publication on 07th October 2025.





OVERLAPPING ORGANISATIONS AND EMERGING POWERS: INDIA'S FORUM SHOPPING STRATEGY IN SOUTH ASIA

FATMA SEVER

MEHMET RECAI UYGUR

Introduction

India's international policy post-1990s is characterised by strategic multi-alignment with several overlapping global networks instead of a rigid alignment to one bloc (Hall, 2021; Kumar, 2024; Majumdar, 2024). This entails that India actively alternates among forums in what is colloquially termed as forum shopping in order to further boost national interests. International relations scholars define forum shopping as the strategic choice of one institution, or arena, over another based on that forum's membership, mandate, decision rules, and enforcement capacity (Murphy & Kellow, 2013; O'Donnell & Papa, 2021, p. 802). As outlined by Murphy and Kellow (2013), the actors consider these characteristics in the arena's design, and a system of overlapping institutions can enhance policy results by providing multiple options for achieving objectives. R  land (2012) explains this as a type of 'diminished multilateralism,' in which an emerging power like India initiates or accentuates other regional or transregional forums to work around the limits of global structures.

Amongst such shifting governance frameworks, scholars show that states have started increasingly engaging in what is termed forum shopping, the movement through institutional settings in pursuit of an advantage to serve national interests (Busch, 2007; Hofmann, 2018). In the case of emerging powers like India, such practices go beyond mere reactions to external forces and become an essential facet of its multi-layered international policy. Most literature centres on dissatisfaction emerging powers have with Western institutions and their bid for status through new forums (R  land, 2012; O'Donnell & Papa, 2021). India's balancing participation in the WTO with SAARC, BIMSTEC, RCEP, and even Quad reflects a careful measurement of inclusion, autonomy, and influence.

India's behaviour indicates a far more blended approach, including a more flexible version of institutionalism and pragmatic multialignment, at both the regional and international level. For clarity, this study treats "multialignment" as a comprehensive concept while also recognising that India's regional foreign policy often manifests itself as flexible and pragmatic institutional forms. Hence, this multialignment approach is, in India's case,



certainly pragmatic, driven by national interests, but also not a rejection of globalisation since India remains active in the UN, WTO and G20 while engaging with numerous other groupings. As External Affairs Minister Jaishankar has noted, India's "multi-alignment or multi-vector" policy allows it to collaborate with different partners on different issues in what optimises India's position (Garg, 2024). Simply put, Upadhyay (2022) notes India's perspective is to "weigh their own side" rather than succumb to either U.S. or China hegemony. This standpoint also serves as a pivotal indicator that motivates us to trace forum shopping within these overlapping organisations. In doing so, India exemplifies how emerging powers strategically engage overlapping regionalism to assert agency, mitigate constraints, and shape the evolving architecture of international order. Therefore, the question of "how does India strategically navigate itself within the increasingly overlapping regional and global organisations" lies at the heart of this study.

Accordingly, this study aims to map and explain India's forum shopping using process tracing and contribute to overlapping regionalism, institutional balancing, and the adaptive responses of emerging powers to a fragmented global order. Thus, this paper analyses how India has implemented this strategy in the context of economic and security priorities within the overlapping phenomenon. In this vein, the study uses a qualitative process tracing method to analyse India's forum shopping strategy within overlapping regional and global contexts. The rationale is to uncover motivations, mechanisms, critical turning points, and India's strategic shifts in relation to institutional engagement since forum shopping entails a complex decision-making process that involves multi-layered international and domestic competing factors. Indian forum selection behaviour and explanatory frameworks can be best captured through process tracing.

Within this scope, this paper advances the existing literature by linking forum shopping to institutional balancing and overlapping regionalism in different mechanisms based on mandate, membership, enforcement, and decision rules. The study does this by applying process tracing to India's institutional alignment since 1991. We analyse, accordingly, India's participation within overlapping regional frameworks such as SAARC vs BIMSTEC, and supra-regional-global ones, particularly BRICS, RIC, SCO, RCEP, UN, and WTO from 1991 to present. We present some instances, like India's pivot from SAARC to BIMSTEC and its subsequent withdrawal from RCEP and study the underlying motivations in terms of forum shopping, considering membership composition, mandate, decision rules, and enforcement. India's approach, we argue, exemplifies an interest-maximising approach to spatial institutional diversity, and it shifts between fora to pursue preferable results achieved through engagement, albeit limited multilateralism.

Theoretical Framework: Overlapping Organisations, Institutional Balancing and Forum Shopping

The post-World War II period saw the emergence of a growing number of regional organisations, which spearheaded academic research on the drivers of regionalism and institutional integration, particularly in Europe (Haas, 1958; Deutsch et al., 1957). Studies of regionalism subsequently expanded theoretically and conceptually, emphasising globalised and multidimensional processes that extend beyond geographical



boundaries (Fawcett & Hurrell, 1995; Söderbaum & Shaw, 2003; Katzenstein, 2005). For example, Acharya (2012) referred to regionalism as a “global heritage” with diverse trajectories in different regions of the world, transcending Eurocentric models (Acharya, 2012, p. 3; Söderbaum, 2015). This pluralistic understanding of regionalism and the rapid proliferation of regional organisations have also paved the way for overlapping regionalism discussions (Panke & Stapel, 2018; Reinsberg & Westerwinter, 2023).

The expansion of global and regional organisations has not been strictly progressive or singularly focused. This has led to overlapping memberships, mandates, functions, and boundaries, which are described as overlapping regionalism (Panke & Stapel, 2018). This is closely related to the complexity of governmental systems where multiple institutions with similar objectives exist, resulting in redundant abundance and functional rivalry (Reinsberg & Westerwinter, 2023). As stated by Panke and Stapel (2018, p. 239), overlapping regional organisations occur when states join more than one organisation under a similar mandate or enforcement that provides both opportunities and constraints for states. This gives states the opportunity to use multifaceted strategies to strengthen and protect their interests, primarily when centralised global institutions such as the UN or WTO are in political deadlocks or unresponsive. These overlapping dyads also echo this reasoning and explain that “institutional balancing”, often known as the creation or sponsorship of new forums, is a response to the dominance of stubborn, outdated multilateral frameworks. Institutional balancing, as He (2015) argued, relies on the use of international institutions to counter a relationship of more than one power and constrain their influence.

Reinsberg and Westerwinter (2023) further suggest that the design of frameworks and institutions with overlapping functions is intentional and the product of powerful countries aiming to prevent the diminishing of their influence in existing forums. These overlapping organisational forms provide less powerful or emerging states with a greater range of institutional options, which is particularly useful in Asia, where there are many competing institutions vying for the same policy spaces. Hence, Panke and Stapel (2023, p. 10) found that Asia stands out as a form of “comprehensive overlap” that is rarely nested based on the percentage of overlapping dyads within the region. Hofmann (2018) states that these overlapping associations permit states many tactical options, especially hostage-taking, forum-shopping, and brokering, that have been designed to change the result of some process. Consequently, forum shopping takes place when a state, facing opposition in one organisation, seeks out another organisation to which it can present the same issue, expecting a warmer welcome. By all means, forum shopping is a useful approach for emerging powers who are attempting to escape structural dependency in the global hierarchy (Stephen, 2017).

Forum shopping is particularly relevant for emerging powers that try to sidestep structural dependency in the global order so as to reproduce their preferences across multiple institutional venues, remould existing coalitions, or abandon unproductive fora. While forum shopping concentrates on the micro-level tactical behaviour of states, broader strategic frameworks such as institutional balancing and multi-alignment capture the rationale behind such decisions. India, for example, can shift between global and regional forums to reproduce or restructure existing alliances, reproduce their preferences across institutional venues, or exit unproductive forums. Such behaviour is



rational and adaptive (Hofmann, 2018), especially in areas with high institutional density. Studies of India's foreign policy confirm this pattern. O'Donnell and Papa (2021) argue that India deliberately overlaps its policy agenda across the RIC, BRICS, and SCO alignments, selectively reinforcing one while the others stagnate in advancing its security objectives. In this case, India's forum shopping is a calculated strategy that allows policymakers to change the venue of an issue to a different space when progress is terminating in a given forum (Murphy & Kellow, 2013; Garg, 2024; O'Donnell & Papa, 2021).

Jamali & Liu (2024) build on this framework in the context of India, claiming India employs institutional balancing to achieve its diplomatic objectives concerning China while sidestepping rising power conundrums like overcommitting to the U.S. or getting mired in bloc politics. It demonstrates how India attempts to sway contested regional forums in a bid to retain strategic autonomy, a concept rooted in Indian foreign policy since Nehru's nonalignment (Kaura, 2021). Rather than global institutions, it is India's turn to approach them that comes off as instrumental. This strategic flexibility stems also from Jaishankar's words, "*India is determined to 'practice strategic autonomy'*" refraining from aligning exclusively with any single power and instead cultivating a plethora of partnerships (Garg, 2024; Upadhyay, 2022). Hence, rational multi-alignment described India's behaviour, as the state participates in and interacts with varying rival powers contingent on non-loyalty, issue-driven interests, instead of on ideological fidelity. O'Donnell and Papa (2021) reinforce this perspective in their examination of India's participation in RIC, BRICS, and SCO, wherein India is shown to selectively mimic its counterterrorism policies as forum shopping for burgeoning BRICS and after the SCO.

International relations and political economy scholars have studied overlapping organisations and institutional balancing, focusing on global institutions and regional organisations (Busch, 2007; Hofmann, 2018; Reinsberg & Westerwinter, 2023). There is a gap, however, in research exploring how emerging powers such as India navigate overlapping regional and global institutions through forum shopping. Even though there are some analyses of India's institutional balancing (Jamali & Liu, 2024) and its multi-alignment diplomacy in BRICS, RIC, and SCO (O'Donnell & Papa, 2021), most of these studies are disconnected and lack an interwoven storyline of India's strategic oscillations across numerous institutions. This study aims to address that gap by conducting a meso-level comparison of India's forum shopping behaviour in South and Southeast Asia, examining the mechanisms of cross-participation among overlapping institutions at both the regional and international level.

Mapping India's Overlapping Membership and Engagement

The study mapped India's institutional relations with regional and international bodies from 1991 to 2024. The timeline is divided into three phases to capture the most relevant changes in the country's political leadership, foreign policy doctrines, and the global environment. The first phase (1991-2004) is marked by India's economic liberalisation and late engagement into global structures with multilateral enthusiasm, such as the WTO and early regionalism, epitomised by SAARC.



Table 1. The map of India's Engagement with Overlapping Regional International Organisations (RIOs)

RIO	Name	Year	Mandate	Scope
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation	1985	Regional	South Asia- 8 States (including Pakistan)
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation	1997	Regional	Bay of Bengal- 7 states
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership	2012/2019	Economic	Asia Pacific-16 Countries
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	2005	Security	Eurasia- 10 members
Quad	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue	2007	Security/Strategic	Asia-Pacific-4 states
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa	2009	Economic	Mini-lateral
RIC	Russia-India-China Strategic Trilateral	2001	Strategic	Mini-lateral
ASEAN Dialogue	Association of Southeast Asian Nations-India Dialogue	1992	Regional	ASEAN-India
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association	1997	Maritime	Indian Ocean/ 23 members
ASEAN-India FTA	Association of Southeast Asian Nations-India Free Trade Agreement	2010	RTA	ASEAN/India
India-Japan CEPA	India-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement	2011	RTA	Bilateral
India-Korea CEPA	India-Korea Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement	2010	RTA	Bilateral
India-UAE CEPA	India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement	2022	RTA	Bilateral
India-Australia ECTA	India-Australia Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement	2022	RTA	Bilateral

Sources: The table has been created by authors considering the Regional Organisations Project (CROP) and the OVREG database from Panke and Stapel (2023).

The second phase (2005-2014) portrays, to some extent, an era of 'dismantlement' of institutional limits with India's deeper participation in the RCEP, BRICS, and ASEAN-centred trade frameworks, along with the growing discontent with SAARC. The post-2014 as the third phase formally begins with Prime Minister Modi where strategic divergence and forum shopping prevail, withdrawing from RCEP, shifting from SAARC to BIMSTEC, increased participation in the Quad, and selective revival of RIC indicating a move away from normative multilateralism towards interest-based institutional maneuvering (Gupta et al., 2019; Hall, 2021; Kumar, 2024; O'Donnell & Papa, 2021). In the realm of India's foreign policy, the forum shopping approach makes it possible to link the outcome of key events like the shift from SAARC to BIMSTEC, the withdrawal from RCEP, or attending



the SCO and Quad simultaneously, with strategic choices, institutional frameworks, and global geopolitical pressure. In this vein, the following table presents Indian's institutional presence across overlapping regional, bilateral, and global platforms. It shows that not only multialignment, but also mini-lateral and issue-based platforms, gain importance in India's engagement strategy, which opens a room to forum shopping strategies through overlapping organisations.

Forum-shopping in Regional Deadlocks: SAARC vs. BIMSTEC

In South Asia, the SAARC (1985) historically included all eight countries of the region: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. SAARC's mandate covers broad socio-economic cooperation that includes the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) but operates on strict consensus rules. Over time, India grew frustrated by the perennial India-Pakistan frictions that repeatedly blocked SAARC progress. For instance, the disputes over Kashmir and terrorism, as well as other bilateral grievances, have repeatedly derailed SAARC meetings or common initiatives (Gurjar, 2017; Bishwakarma & Hu, 2022; O'Donnell & Papa, 2021).

In the 2010s, Pakistan notoriously withdrew from SAARC infrastructure projects and staged a military parade in 2016 on the eve of a summit, which led to a subsequent boycott of the 2016 SAARC Summit in Pakistan by India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Bhutan (Anwar, 2022, p. 17). India's government and media branded Pakistan as the biggest "deadlock" to South Asian cooperation (Waggy & Hassan, 2023; Gurjar, 2017). Consequently, SAARC activity virtually came to a standstill, and there were no summits from 2014 to 2022. In response to this deadlock, India turned to alternate regional bodies, implementing "forum shopping" strategies. These regional economic bodies are highlighted in the Table above alongside India's engagement, reflecting India's strategic participation.

Both SAARC and BIMSTEC share the characteristics of weak enforcement and lack of treaty obligations, but the modified membership of BIMSTEC stands out as an important structural feature. In practice, India uses BIMSTEC for connectivity, power projects, and security dialogues while SAARC remains moribund (Anwar, 2022). BIMSTEC (1997) captures parts of the SAARC geography but leaves out Pakistan. Its members include Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and later Myanmar and Thailand (ASEAN members) (Gurjar, 2017). India has found a more flexible framework to pursue its objectives of South Asian and Southeast Asian integration without Pakistan. Modi's India has convened BIMSTEC heads of government summits, the first one in Goa in 2016, chaired meetings of the security chiefs, and sparked new projects under BIMSTEC like connecting the power grid of Bangladesh and India and counterterrorism dialogues regionally (O'Donnell & Papa, 2021).

Indian policy pronouncements make clear the reasoning. India pointed out Pakistan as opposed to the possible regional integrations under SAARC that also show a strategic shift toward BIMSTEC, which offers India a chance to engage with its South and Southeast Asian neighbours without being weighed down by Pakistan (Gupta et al., 2019; Gurjar, 2017). To summarise, India swapped forums: it pursued its South Asian agenda



through BIMSTEC instead of SAARC. Pakistan's veto power in SAARC turned the region into a forum of unwanted competition in the eyes of other members, classic forum shopping, while BIMSTEC's composition without Pakistan and comparatively looser enforcement welcomed progress on trade, connectivity, and security, which are fundamental to India (Murphy & Kellow, 2013).

Economic Forum Shopping: WTO, RCEP and Trade Agreements

India additionally utilises the forums of the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean Regions. For example, IORA promotes India-ASEAN connections for trade and maritime security free from South Asian political encumbrances. India also engages bilaterally, like with "Act East" ties with ASEAN, when regional collectives fall short. These patterns also demonstrate forum shopping: India seeks integration in the Bay of Bengal, East Asia Summit or Indian Ocean initiatives, unencumbered by South Asian logjam politics.

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) was one of the more prominent Asia-Pacific FTAs with 16 member nations: ASEAN-China, Japan, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and India. India entered the negotiations in 2012 but withdrew in 2019 during the summit. This illustrates India's options among economic forums. India's domestic interests clashed with RCEP's strict free-trade commitments and large membership, including China. Modi stated that the present form of the RCEP agreement does not fully reflect the basic spirit and the agreed guiding principles of RCEP and further stated that it did not satisfactorily address India's outstanding issues and concerns (Gupta et al., 2019; Gupta & Ganguly, 2020). Indian experts argue that India would have been compelled to drastically reduce tariffs on a wide range of goods, including mobile phones and agricultural products, to 2014 levels, endangering the 'Make in India' initiative (Kadekodi, 2018). More importantly, the massive trade deficits India faced with the RCEP countries, especially China, coupled with the surge of low-cost goods, influenced the decision (Rawat et al., 2020). This also highlights India's attempts at forum shopping with regional institutions.

Instead of locking itself into a rigid Asia-Pacific FTA that India deemed unfavourable, they sought to trade through different avenues. These include existing bilateral agreements, the ASEAN plus agreements, and the WTO approach. In withdrawing, India anticipated self-relegating to RCEP-15 and missing out on the chance to integrate its economy, but Indian leaders determined that adopting "strategic withdrawal" to protect domestic producers and strategic sectors was more advantageous (Gaur, 2022; Siew, 2019). Domestically, India measured access to the market vis-à-vis protection of the market and opted for the latter, ultimately deciding to participate in the RCEP forum. India's post-2014 trade policy was heavily reliant on protectionist measures fueled by the perception that previous Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) permitted an unrestrained flow of Chinese imports without adequate protective measures (Gupta & Ganguly, 2020).

Consequently, shifting focus to India's economic relations, there is evidence of forum shopping wherein India rejects one set of venues (RCEP) in favour of others (bilateral FTAs, WTO) that more closely align with its decision criteria and mandate preferences, as shown in the Table above. India's multilateral engagement with global issues has been



active and steadfast where its interests intersect, as in the case of the WTO, where India has been an outspoken advocate of the developing countries' special and differential treatment, food security, and flexibility concerning intellectual property rights. There are times also when Indian negotiators have chosen to boycott WTO packages when Modi threatened to derail the WTO 2013 Bali package due to its potential impact on India's public food distribution system (Erixon, 2014, p. 4).

India has allied with some other countries of the Global South in demanding deeper reform as well. India stays primarily committed to the WTO as a forum, even with the understanding that leaving would entirely sacrifice negotiating ground, and despite protectionist rhetoric at home. In effect, India maximises the use of the WTO enforcement as dispute settlement in cases where benefits are clear while exercising caution on fully liberalising trade (Chakraborty, 2023). There are two distinguishing characteristics of important economic trade forums. RCEP had a strict free-trade mandate, whereas the WTO is broad-based with an enforceable dispute system. India opted out of RCEP because its decision rules and content clashed with national interests, but remained committed to the WTO (Chakraborty, 2023; Hopewell, 2022).

Forum Shopping in the Security Realm: RIC, BRICS, SCO, QUAD

India's strategic forum shopping is also pronounced in the overlapping security domains. Within the context of Eurasia, the trilateral RIC (Russia-India-China) grouping was created in 2001 as a response to unilateralism and an early step toward what eventually became BRICS. India was a co-founder of RIC, but for a long time, it considered it merely a diplomatic talk shop. From the mid-2000s, both Modi and Putin appeared to agree that with the addition of Brazil and South Africa, BRICS was a more useful multilateral platform (Cecchi, 2025; Upadhyay, 2022). India also focused on bilateral relations, such as with the U.S., because of tensions with China. After the 2020 Galwan border clash with China, India controversially reactivated RIC meetings in 2018 and 2020, including unprecedented meetings between defence ministers (Cecchi, 2025; O'Donnell & Papa, 2021).

This sequence is also explained by O'Donnell & Papa (2021) as classic forum-shopping. It is shown that India deprioritised counterterrorism and security matters to stagnate within BRICS and SCO, which has been an important incentive to revive RIC and impose the same agenda there. To put it differently, India aims for overlapping convergences in policy goals among RIC, BRICS and SCO, and when discontented with one place, shifts focus to another. As noted in the article, India's example illustrates that policymakers, when facing challenges in their preferred policy space, often look for alternative locations to implement policies.

As in the Table, the SCO with 8 members, including China, Russia, Pakistan, and now India, is largely focused on counterterrorism and political-security cooperation. India became a member of the SCO in 2017 in order to have a say in Central Asian security issues and work on cross-border terrorism. However, the overlap of China and Pakistan in the SCO means India faces quite difficult dynamics. While India has sustained a selective engagement in the SCO, the border clashes with China have also pushed it to



enhance its involvement in the Quad as a balancing mechanism (Ali, 2023). Hence, the Quad's informal shape as an Indo-Pacific forum (U.S., Japan, Australia, India) is a minilateral counterbalance to China, although lacking formal rules to make decisions or a secretariat, is far more flexible (Kumar, 2024; Thakur, 2024). Thus, India adopted the revived Quad to strengthen its naval and technological partnership with the Western democracies, counter China's belligerence, and advance the vision of an "open and inclusive" Indo-Pacific region.

India also continues to actively participate in broader global frameworks. In the United Nations, India pursues its security-development strategies and aims to receive a permanent seat on the Security Council, which China and Russia oppose. Doing so, they actively engage with South Africa and Brazil, both of which are also pursuing permanent seats on the Security Council, through the IBSA Dialogue Forum and the G4 coalition (Stuenkel, 2019; Touthang, 2024). India's engagement with the IBSA Dialogue Forum demonstrates a further example of forum shopping, which enables these rising powers to coordinate their positions on Security Council reform and global governance (Alden & Le Pere, 2023). India's engagement with IBSA further underscores its selective engagement that supports the country's ambition to gain legitimacy and recognition in the global order.

Beyond the regional manoeuvres, India also hosts one of the world's largest UN peacekeeping operations to strengthen its legitimacy and claim as a global leader. Moreover, India is a member of the G20, which it chaired in 2023, as well as the Commonwealth, and uses these fora to advocate for infrastructure financing and climate-and-health initiatives (Touthang, 2024). More importantly, India compartmentalises issues by forum that can bring up counterterrorism at the UN because it needs to consider Pakistan's votes at the UNGA, or at ASEAN+ meetings, but then use BRICS or RIC for different emphases on multilateral reform (Chandra, 2020). This too can be viewed as a form of forum shopping, not only to hedge against regional powers, but also to pursue legitimacy and project status in the changing global order.

Overlapping Institutions and India's Forum Shopping Patterns

Based on these cases, India seems to have a systematic way of dealing with changing institutional elements in relation to a region's forum shopping behaviour. To begin with, India tends to select forums that either include important partners and/or exclude critical foes based on membership compositions. India is explicitly sidelining SAARC for BIMSTEC to exclude Pakistan. On the other hand, India partially joined the SCO because of its Central Asian and Russian members, who are important for their security purposes, even if China and Pakistan are also members. India also turned its face to the Quad, which is without China or Russia when it seeks China-free maritime dialogues (Waggy & Hassan, 2023). Thus, Membership formulations dramatically determine the forum preferred by India.

Second of all, India has pushed its agenda in forums where the charter does best fit the agenda. Emphasis on terrorism in the SCO and RIC is clearly defined within the charter and has an explicit focus of sorts on the SCO (Kumar, 2024). Also, India focuses on



economic development in BRICS and trade liberalisation in the WTO/FTAs. India may change venues if the mandate of the forum is overly broad or too narrow. India did not fulfil development goals with RCEP's limited trade scope. However, India does prefer the multi-sectoral BIMSTEC that allows security and trade discussions, which far better aligns with India's regional agenda (Gaur, 2022; O'Donnell & Papa, 2021; Roy, 2022).

Thirdly, India devises a meeting room with the structures. India often resorts to SAARC, BIMSTEC, or forums that permit unilateral and bilateral coalitions when consensus groups are stagnant. The BIMSTEC is also consensus-based, but it is easier for India to get approval there since Pakistan is absent and the other members have aligned priorities. The Quad and RIC have no formal voting regulations at all, which gives India leeway (Anwar, 2022; Gurjar, 2017; Waggy & Hassan, 2023). India usually invokes binding dispute resolution, but also blocks results if the group is deadlocked. India's exit from RCEP shows that even in consensus-based systems, a single member can effectively veto membership by withdrawing.

Finally, the organisational enforcement mechanisms and resource capacity are other things that impact forum shopping related to India. With India, stronger forums are utilised when binding outcomes are needed and weaker ones when more flexibility is needed. India opts for WTO litigation for winning disputes like on cotton subsidies because once won, they can enforce trade rules (Chakraborty, 2023; Erixon, 2014; Waggy & Hassan, 2023). On the contrary, SAARC and BIMSTEC declarations are mostly unenforceable, which is why India moves things there that do not require strict adherence. The SCO has some institutional heft, but little to no actual enforcement. Since the Quad is completely informal in structure, India has no obligations to participate but serves as a minilateral counterbalance to China (Thakur, 2024). This is why India's forum selection often coincides with whether it prefers formal commitments, such as the WTO, or informal dialogue like the Quad, RIC (Kumar, 2024).

To summarise, these identified patterns indicate that forum shopping sheds light on India's stance in the geopolitical theatre. It evaluates the character of each institution and shifts locations to exploit the most favourable arrangement. As Murphy & Kellow (2013) point out, overlapping arenas provide multiple redundant chances to increase flexibility or marginalise opposition, which is exactly what India does. After the BRICS consensus failed (e.g., not reaching minimum agreements on basic measures and designating certain figures as terrorists) or stalled due to SCO-gatekeeping, India sought alternative gatherings (e.g., RIC ministerial sideline meetings (Cecchi, 2025; Cooper, 2021). When the terms of RCEP posed a threat to domestic producers, India withdrew and strategically opted for bilateral agreements along with pathways through the WTO. After progress stagnated within SAARC, India formed BIMSTEC and "ignored SAARC" even during the 2016 BRICS outreach summit (O'Donnell & Papa, 2021; Burakowski, 2025). Such actions are not ideologically motivated but calculated moves to optimise interests.



Discussion and Conclusion

The case of India after the Cold War illustrates how India pragmatically and selectively blends together different institutions with a pragmatic touch. It mirrors India's aspiration of being a shaper of global rules rather than a mere follower, alongside its carefully crafted geopolitical manoeuvres within overlapping multilateral frameworks. This study illustrates with a process-traced timeline, along with the comparative institutional analysis, that India's global engagement is not linear or uniform. Instead, it reflects a forum shopping reasoning where India participates in or opts out of global or regional institutions based on issue alignment, strategic autonomy, and power asymmetries.

Forum shopping as a concept used theories on how states decide on certain institutional venues to achieve maximum gains in policies (Busch, 2007; Hofmann, 2018). It is observable in India's conduct, especially with respect to its exit from RCEP and shift towards bilateral and mini-lateral agreements like the India-CEPA and the Quad (Hall, 2021; Kapoor, 2023). Instead of rejecting global governance systems entirely, India has filled many interdependent institutions, which often function as systems of cross-framework governance, and adeptly navigates within and between them. From time to time, India's leaders tend to invoke some form of forum shopping logic that looks for or designs ways to advance proposals in Indian-dominated ecosystems. India's external affairs officials, for instance, have stated that they encourage the use of the multilateral system to improve the governance of inter-institutional relations so that all operate in support of the system. This is celebrated in India as a form of 'internationalism' which enables India greater autonomy to (Chatterjee & Maitra, 2024; Roy, 2022). Unlike the classical approach to forum shopping that focuses on the existence of overlapping venues in a trade framework, India's model integrates strategy, economics, and geopolitics, blurring the domains of polity and security, thus also broadening the rationale of forum shopping.

Simultaneously, the literature on overlapping regionalism is also helpful for understanding the context of India's forum shopping around multiple memberships (Panke & Stapel, 2018; Reinsberg & Westerwinter, 2023). While SAARC has stagnated due to structural veto problems stemming from the Indo-Pakistani conflict, India has vigorously supported BIMSTEC in order to circumvent such deadlocks (Haokip, 2014; Pant & Passi, 2017). This form of selective regional prioritisation illustrates India's geopolitical pragmatism and a tendency shared with other rising powers, preferring low-constraint, high-flexibility environments. Geopolitically, this is how India has managed to obtain collaboration on important matters while hedging against tensions. Hence, India has shifted the regional framework by preferring BIMSTEC to SAARC and transformed India's position regarding global frameworks by placing itself outside of RCEP but active in WTO, BRICS, and UN.

The interplay between the RIC, the SCO, and the Quad also highlights the layered nature of India's forum shopping strategy. Complementing this, the IBSA Dialogue Forum highlights another coalition of India, Brazil, and South Africa seeking legitimacy and reform in global governance, particularly the expansion of the UN Security Council. The findings remind us that India is not rejecting international frameworks, but it takes advantage of strategic overlap to advance its objectives. In this way, India utilises and



also contributes to the regime complexity of contemporary global governance. As scholars warn, many overlapping organisations increase the complexity of governance, which Indian policymakers have used to their advantage to maximise their interest and power (Hofmann, 2018; Panke & Stapel, 2018; Reinsberg & Westerwinter, 2023).

To sum up, India has executed a hybrid approach, scratching out merging forum shopping, institutional balancing, and overlapping regionalism into one core design. The study advances the debate of this literature by illustrating that emerging powers, particularly India, practice strategic forum shopping not only to preserve autonomy, norms, and mitigate risks, but also to hedge against uncontrolled results. Further research could be directed at exploring the impact of India's forum shopping on organisational change, norm diffusion, and the overarching structure of global governance.

References

- Acharya, A. (2012). Comparative Regionalism: A Field Whose Time Has Come? *The International Spectator*, 47(1), 3–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2012.655004>.
- Alden, C., & Le Pere, G. (2024). Southern multilateralism from IBSA to NDB: Synergies, continuities, and regional options. *Global Policy*, 15(2), 389–397. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13246>.
- Ali, G. (2023). Territorial disputes, the role of leaders and the impact of Quad: a triangular explanation of China-India border escalations. *The Pacific Review*, 37(3), 533–555. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2023.2185662>.
- Anwar, M. F. (2022). SAARC AND ASEAN: A Comparative Study Success and Failure. *International Journal of Social Sciences*, 11(2), 13–23. <https://doi.org/10.52950/SS.2022.11.2.002>
- Beach, D., & Pedersen, R. (2018). Process-Tracing Methods. *Process-Tracing Methods*. <https://doi.org/10.3998/MPUB.10072208>
- Bishwakarma, J. K., & Hu, Z. (2022). Problems and prospects for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). *Politics & Policy*, 50(1), 154–179. <https://doi.org/10.1111/POLP.12443>
- Burakowski, A. (2025). 'A plethora of ad hoc arrangements, like the BRICS': India and the BRICS expansion. *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations*, 5, 7. <https://doi.org/10.12688/STOMIEDINTRELAT.17932.1>
- Busch, M. L. (2007). Overlapping Institutions, Forum Shopping, and Dispute Settlement in International Trade. *International Organisation*, 61(4), 735–761. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818307070257>
- Cecchi, C. (2025). *China and India: Cooperation and rivalry in the Global landscape and within the BRICS*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/SSRN.5220619>
- Chakraborty, D. (2023). India at the WTO: torn between multilateralism and domestic interests? In: The Elgar Companion to the World Trade Organisation. *The Elgar*



Companion to the World Trade Organisation, 782–794.
<https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/book/9781800882867/chapter43.xml>

Chandra, V. (2020). India's counterterrorism diplomacy at the United Nations: Progress and problems. *India Quarterly*, 76(1), 40-57.

Chatterjee, S., & Maitra, S. (2024). India's Multilateralism and the Liberal International Order: Discerning Trends. *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*, 28(1), 31–51.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/09735984251327252>

Cooper, A. F. (2021). 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(9), 1945–1962.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1829464>

Deutsch, K. W., Burrell, S. A., Kann, R. A., Lee, M., Lichterman, M., Lindgren, R. E., Loewenheim, F. L., & van Wagenen, R. W. (1957). *Political community and the North Atlantic area: International organisation in the light of historical experience*. Princeton University Press.

Erixon, F. (2014). AFTER THE BALI AGREEMENT: Lessons from the Doha Round for the WTO's Post-Bali Agenda. *European Centre for International Political Economy (ECIPE)*.

Fawcett, L., & Hurrell, A. (1995). *Regionalism in world politics: Regional organisation and international order*. Oxford University Press.

Garg, K. (2024, October 3). *Why multi-alignment matters to India, explains Jaishankar* | India Writes. India Writes Network. <https://www.indiawrites.org/diplomacy/why-multi-alignment-matters-to-india-explains-jaishankar/>

Gaur, P. (2022). India's withdrawal from RCEP: neutralising national trade concerns. *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy*, 27(2), 270–288.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13547860.2020.1809772>.

Gupta, S., & Ganguly, S. (2020, October 23). *Why India Refused to Join the RCEP, the World's Biggest Trading Bloc*. Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/23/why-india-refused-to-join-rcep-worlds-biggest-trading-bloc/>

Gupta, S., Mullen, R. D., Basrur, R., Hall, I., Blarel, N., Pardesi, M. S., & Ganguly, S. (2019). Indian Foreign Policy under Modi: A New Brand or Just Repackaging? *International Studies Perspectives*, 20(1), 1–45. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ISP/EKY008>.

Gurjar, S. (2017, April 1). *Is SAARC Doomed?* The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/is-saarc-doomed/>

Haas, E. B. (1958). *"The Uniting of Europe": Political, Social, and Economic Forces 1950-1957*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Hall, I. (2021). India: Seeking multipolarity, favouring multilateralism, pursuing multialignment. *National Perspectives on a Multipolar Order*, 42–64.
<https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526159380.00010>.



- Haokip, T. (2014). India's Look East Policy: Its Evolution and Approach. *South Asian Survey*, 18(2), 239-257. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971523113513368> (Original work published 2011).
- He, K. (2015). Contested regional orders and institutional balancing in the Asia Pacific. *International Politics*, 52(2), 208-222. <https://doi.org/10.1057/IP.2014.46>.
- Hofmann, S. C. (2018). The politics of overlapping organisations: hostage-taking, forum-shopping, and brokering. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 26(6), 883-905. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2018.1512644;PAGE:STRING:ARTICLE/CHAPTER>.
- Hopewell, K. (2022). Emerging Powers, Leadership, and South-South Solidarity: The Battle Over Special and Differential Treatment at the WTO. *Global Policy*, 13(4), 469-482. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13092>.
- Jamali, A. B., & Liu, H. (2024). India in Contested Regional Multilateralism: Between Seeking Institutional Balancing and Avoiding Rising Power Dilemmas. *Pacific Focus*, 39(2), 332-360. <https://doi.org/10.1111/PAFO.12256>.
- Kadekodi, G. K. (2018). *Make in India: Policy Drives and Challenges*. 83-105. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-7950-4_4.
- Kapoor, N. (2023). Multi-alignment under "Uneven Multipolarity": India's Relations with Russia in an Evolving World Order. *Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta*, 16(2), 15-32. <https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2023-2-89-15-32>.
- Katzenstein, P. J. (2005). *A world of regions: Asia and Europe in the American imperium*. Cornell University Press.
- Kaura, V. (2021). Debating the Relevance of Nonalignment in Indian Diplomacy. *India Quarterly*, 77(3), 501-506. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09749284211027136>
- Kumar, A. (2024). Quest for a Rules-Based World Order: An Analysis of India's Engagement with Multilateral and Mini-Lateral Organisations. *75 Years of India's Foreign Policy: Bilateral, Conventional and Emerging Trends*, 485-504. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-6054-1_21.
- Majumdar, A. J. (2024). The Evolving Trajectory of India's Foreign Policy: Nonalignment to Multi-Engagement and Beyond. *75 Years of India's Foreign Policy: Bilateral, Conventional and Emerging Trends*, 63-81. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-6054-1_4
- Murphy, H., & Kellow, A. (2013). Forum Shopping in Global Governance: Understanding States, Business and NGOs in Multiple Arenas. *Global Policy*, 4(2), 139-149. <https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1758-5899.2012.00195.X/ABSTRACT>
- O'Donnell, F., & Papa, M. (2021). India's multi-alignment management and the Russia-India-China (RIC) triangle. *International Affairs*, 97(3), 801-822. <https://doi.org/10.1093/IA/IIAB036>.
- Panke, D., & Stapel, S. (2018). Overlapping regionalism in Europe: Patterns and effects. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 20(1), 239-258. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148117737924>.



- Panke, D., & Stapel, S. (2023). Overlapping regionalism around the world: Introducing the overlapping regionalism dataset. *International Area Studies Review*, 26(4), 449-463.
- Pant, H. V., & Passi, R. (2017). India's response to China's Belt and Road Initiative: A policy in motion. *Asia Policy*, 24(1), 88-95.
- Rawat, M., Raj, R., & Agarwal, T. (2020). A Critical Review of Make in India as an Import Substitute. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3569655>.
- Reinsberg, B., & Westerwinter, O. (2023). Institutional Overlap in Global Governance and the Design of Intergovernmental Organisations. *The Review of International Organisations*, 18(4), 693-724. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S11558-023-09488-2>.
- Roy, I. (2022). Southern multilateralism: Complementary competition vis-à-vis the Liberal International Order. *Global Perspectives*, 3(1), 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1525/gp.2022.39589>.
- Rüland, J. (2012). The rise of "diminished multilateralism": East Asian and European forum shopping in global governance. *Asia Europe Journal*, 9(2), 255-270. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S10308-012-0311-9>.
- Siew, T. (2019). "What India's Withdrawal from RCEP Means for ASEAN, India and the Indo-Pacific Concept" by Tang Siew Mun - ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. ISEAS. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/commentaries/what-indias-withdrawal-from-rcep-means-for-asean-india-and-the-indopacific-concept-by-tang-siew-mun/>
- Söderbaum, F., & Shaw, T. M. (Eds.). (2003). *Theories of new regionalism: A reader*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Söderbaum, F., 2015. "Early, Old, New and Comparative Regionalism: The Scholarly Development of the Field," KFG Working Paper Series, No. 64, October 2015, Kolleg-Forschergruppe (KFG) "The Transformative Power of Europe", Freie Universität Berlin. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283572967_'Early_Old_New_and_Comparative_Regionalism_The_Scholarly_Development_of_the_Field'
- Stephen, M. D. (2017). Emerging Powers and Emerging Trends in Global Governance Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB). *Global Governance*, 23(3). <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02303009>
- Stuenkel, O. (2019). *India-Brazil-South Africa dialogue forum (IBSA): the rise of the global south*. Routledge.
- Thakur, H. K. (2024). Restoring multilateralism: the challenge from the Global South and the rising minilaterals. *Round Table*, 113(6), 556-581. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2024.2439673>.
- Touthang, T. R. (2024). India's Strive for Permanent Membership in The United Nations Security Council: A Persistent Pursuit. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 4315-4321. <https://doi.org/10.53555/KUEY.V30I1.79>.



Upadhyay, S. (2022). *BRICS, Quad, and India's Multi-Alignment Strategy*. Stimson Centre. <https://www.stimson.org/2022/brics-quad-and-indias-multi-alignment-strategy/>

Waggy, M. M., & Hassan, K. W. (2023). Antagonistic States in Multilateral Forums: India and Pakistan in SAARC and SCO. *Cappadocia Journal of Area Studies (CJAS)*, Cappadocia University. <https://doi.org/10.38154/CJAS.2024.65>.

BRICS POLICIES TOWARDS THE UNITED NATIONS, WORLD TRADE ORGANISATION AND EUROPEAN UNION

ZEKERI MOMOH

momohzekeri@gmail.com, momohz@kku.edu.ng

Faculty of Arts, Management and Social Sciences, Department of Political Science,
Karl Kumm University, Vom-Plateau State (Nigeria). <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7938-8738>

Abstract

The BRICS bloc, initially comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, expanded in 2023 to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, forming what is now informally called BRICS+. With 13 additional partner countries, such as Algeria, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Turkey, Uganda, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam, BRICS represents a population of 3.27 billion, around 41.13% of the world's total and contributes 32% of global GDP. Leveraging this demographic and economic power, BRICS seeks to influence global governance, particularly within the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and in its relations with the European Union (EU). This study is anchored on realist theory, while secondary data were used for the study and content analysis was used to evaluate the effectiveness of BRICS policies toward these institutions. It is argued that BRICS collectively challenges Western dominance by advocating for reforms that enhance the voice of emerging economies. At the UN, BRICS supports reforming the Security Council to reflect today's geopolitical realities. Within the WTO, it promotes a transparent, rules-based, and inclusive trading system. While BRICS does not engage the EU as a unified bloc, individual member states interact with the EU independently. Nevertheless, the bloc has jointly criticised the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), viewing it as a veiled protectionist policy that harms BRICS exporters. The study concludes by recommending that BRICS strengthen its advocacy for UN reform, maintain a united front for equitable WTO rules, and deepen diplomatic engagement with the EU based on mutual respect and fair economic practices.

Keywords

BRICS Plus, United Nations, WTO, EU, G7, Policies, Power, Economy.

Resumo

O bloco BRICS, inicialmente composto por Brasil, Rússia, Índia, China e África do Sul, expandiu-se em 2023 para incluir Egito, Etiópia, Irão e Emirados Árabes Unidos, formando o que hoje é informalmente chamado de BRICS+. Com 13 países parceiros adicionais, como Argélia, Bielorrússia, Bolívia, Cuba, Indonésia, Cazaquistão, Malásia, Nigéria, Tailândia, Turquia, Uganda, Uzbequistão e Vietname, o BRICS representa uma população de 3,27 mil milhões, cerca de 41,13% do total mundial, e contribui com 32% do PIB global. Aproveitando esse poder demográfico e económico, o BRICS busca influenciar a governança global, particularmente dentro das Nações Unidas (ONU), da Organização Mundial do Comércio (OMC)



e nas suas relações com a União Europeia (UE). Este estudo está ancorado na teoria realista, enquanto dados secundários foram usados para o estudo e a análise de conteúdo foi usada para avaliar a eficácia das políticas do BRICS em relação a essas instituições. Argumenta-se que o BRICS desafia coletivamente o domínio ocidental, defendendo reformas que aumentem a voz das economias emergentes. Na ONU, o BRICS apoia a reforma do Conselho de Segurança para refletir as realidades geopolíticas atuais. Na OMC, promove um sistema comercial transparente, baseado em regras e inclusivo. Embora o BRICS não se envolva com a UE como um bloco unificado, os Estados-membros individuais interagem com a UE de forma independente. No entanto, o bloco criticou conjuntamente o Mecanismo de Ajustamento Carbónico nas Fronteiras (CBAM) da UE, considerando-o uma política protecionista velada que prejudica os exportadores do BRICS. O estudo conclui recomendando que o BRICS reforce a sua defesa da reforma da ONU, mantenha uma frente unida para regras equitativas da OMC e aprofunde o envolvimento diplomático com a UE com base no respeito mútuo e em práticas económicas justas.

Palavras-chave

BRICS Plus, Nações Unidas, OMC, UE, G7, Políticas, Poder, Economia.

How to cite this article

Momoh, Zekeri (2025). BRICS Policies Towards the United Nations, World Trade Organisation and European Union. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 320-341. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.17>

Article submitted on 24th July 2025 and accepted for publication on 01st September 2025.





BRICS POLICIES TOWARDS THE UNITED NATIONS, WORLD TRADE ORGANISATION AND EUROPEAN UNION

ZEKERI MOMOH

Introduction

The word *BRIC* was an acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, and China, which was first coined by Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill in his research paper titled *Building Better Global Economic BRICs*, in 2001. He argued that the growth of Brazil, Russia, India, and China was poised to challenge the G7 nations, describing the growth as significant in reshaping the international economy (O'Neill, 2001).

Moreover, Brazil, Russia, India, and China began formal diplomatic engagement with each other in 2006 on how to strengthen their economic tie. The first BRIC summit was held in Yekaterinburg, Russia, in 2009. In 2010, South Africa was invited by the BRIC nations to join their economic platform, thereby expanding the BRIC platform into *BRICS* (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) (BRICS, 2010). Since then, BRICS nations have transformed into a significant multilateral political and economic platform within the global economy, advocating for critical reforms in international governance and promoting a more multipolar world order as opposed to the present unipolar world order dominated by the United States.

In recent years, a number of reasons have been advanced in the literature of International Political Economy for the growing influence of BRICS countries, particularly China and India. One of the reasons has been attributed to the growing population of China and India, as both nations possess massive populations that serve as both sources of consumer market and labour sources. Besides, many BRICS nations have undergone accelerated industrialisation and urban development, such as China, India, Russia, Brazil and South Africa, leading to increased productivity, infrastructure expansion, and manufacturing output (Stuenkel, 2020).

Similarly, BRICS nations are continuously diversifying their economy beyond primary commodities into manufacturing and services. For instance, Brazil is expanding its agribusiness sector, India is developing its services and tech sectors, while China has become a global leader in manufacturing and green technology. It is also important to note that high levels of public investment in infrastructure, education, and research and development have enabled BRICS countries, especially China and India, to enhance their competitiveness and productivity at the international level (World Bank, 2023). Also, BRICS states tend to promote economic cooperation among developing countries,



thereby facilitating trade, investment, and political solidarity. This effort helps to strengthen their bargaining power in global institutions like the UN and WTO (Gasper et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) and Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) by BRICS states provides alternative sources of finance and monetary support to member states and helps in reducing dependency on Western-dominated institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Cooper, 2021). Consequently, BRICS states such as Russia, Brazil, and South Africa are endowed with abundant energy, minerals, and agricultural resources, making them critical players in global commodity markets, especially amid rising global demand for rare earth.

In contemporary times, BRICS states are beginning to forge bilateral and multilateral trade agreements, thereby expanding their influence in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, through the promotion of de-dollarisation in trade settlements, which has continued to enhance BRICS states' monetary autonomy (Thakur, 2020). Although, despite global slowdowns, BRICS nations such as India and China have continued to record robust GDP growth, contributing significantly to global economic expansion and lifting millions out of poverty.

Since the formation of BRICS, the international political and economic order has undergone significant changes, with the BRICS nations increasingly challenging Western dominance within the international system. Over the years, BRICS nations have evolved from a theoretical economic construct into a significant geopolitical bloc that now actively shapes global governance debates. One of the requirements for the selection of the BRICS nations was based on their population size, natural resource endowments, economic growth trajectories, and potential for global influence.

Furthermore, the BRICS and G7 are two influential global blocs representing the emerging political and economic power centres within the international system. While the G7 as of today consists of advanced industrialised nations with high per capita income, such as the U.S., Britain, France, Italy, Canada, Germany and Japan. BRICS includes major emerging economies such as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Other newly admitted members of the BRICS include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the UAE, with partners such as Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Uganda, and Uzbekistan. The strategic goals of the G7 are to lead global policy on security, climate change, pandemic response and global finance, while BRICS seeks to pursue multipolarity, financial alternatives to Western-led institutions, promote trade in local currencies and reform the United Nations, especially the United Nations Security Council and World Bank structures. It is against this background that this study seeks to investigate the efficacy of the BRICS policies towards the United Nations, the WTO and the European Union.

Literature Review

There are growing empirical studies that indicate BRICS collective action in seeking UN Security Council reform to better reflect contemporary global realities. For instance,



Mearsheimer (2001) argues that power transitions usually influence institutional redesign, which supports BRICS' demands for a new world order that is multipolar in nature. In a content analysis of BRICS summit declarations (2009–2022), Stuenkel (2015) found repeated calls by BRICS for equitable representation and greater roles for developing countries in global governance. This has been demonstrated by China and Russia at the UN Security Council to check Western hegemony, while BRICS nations such as India, Brazil, and South Africa have continued to lobby for permanent seats at the UN Security Council.

Bond (2016), using qualitative interviews with diplomats, documented how India and Brazil use multilateral forums to push for UN reform. However, Bond (2016) argued that the internal contradictions within BRICS have continued to impede this effort. Similarly, Acharya (2017) empirically traced the shift from Western liberal hegemony to a multipolar world order, emphasising how BRICS' coordinated positions at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) have continued to reflect a broader move towards norm diffusion rather than outright rejection of liberal institutionalism.

However, Sinha and Mishra (2020) in their study observed that China and India increasingly file and defend cases, challenging EU and U.S. agricultural and intellectual property policies at the WTO. They further argued that BRICS have adopted both defensive and proactive stances in their engagement against the EU and the U.S in many fora. Furthermore, Sinha and Mishra (2020) employed data from WTO dispute settlement proceedings in their study to back up their argument. Consequently, Hopewell (2018) in his study argues that BRICS Trade Ministers' Meetings have continued to emphasise the preservation of the multilateral trading system. Hopewell (2018) further shows how India and Brazil act as "norm entrepreneurs" in resisting trade liberalisation by Western nations that undermines domestic industries in the Global South. In a related study, Hopewell (2016) argued that China's support for Special and Differential Treatment (SDT) has been documented in WTO archives and debates, underscoring BRICS' solidarity with the developing countries around the world. In the same vein, Bond (2016) has argued that empirical data have revealed growing divergences, especially in China's economic clout, which often sidelines other BRICS members, and South Africa's weaker bargaining power has limited its strategic influence at the international level.

Empirical evidence from Stuenkel (2015) and Bond (2016) shows that while the EU seeks to engage BRICS as a body, BRICS countries prefer bilateral engagement with the EU due to divergent interests. Evidence from the WTO indicates that between 2009 and 2022, the EU filed 34 complaints against BRICS+ countries, while BRICS+ countries, on the other hand, filed 16 complaints against the EU (WTO Dispute Settlement Database, 2023). Therefore, BRICS-EU relations are complex and marked by both dialogue and dispute.

Furthermore, Acharya (2017) argues that despite overlapping economic interests, BRICS members are sceptical of EU normative agendas, especially on climate change and human rights, as EU-BRICS dialogue forums have shown limited coherence. For instance, empirical studies from the European Council on Foreign Relations revealed BRICS resistance to EU conditionalities in trade and aid negotiations. Nevertheless, empirical studies have also shown that the BRICS collective influence has continued to challenge Western dominance and remains critical in reshaping global institutional norms.



On the whole, from the review of empirical literature, BRICS adopts strategic interest-based policies toward the UN, WTO, and EU, while unified in statement, internal asymmetries and conflicting national interests have continued to undermine BRICS cohesion. Therefore, from the review of literature, there is a gap in the literature, such as Mearsheimer (2001), Stuenkel (2015), Bond (2016), Hopewell (2018), Acharya (2017), and Sinha and Mishra (2020) on a comparative study of BRICS policies towards the UN, WTO, and EU in a single study. It is against this background that this study seeks to interrogate the efficacy of the BRICS policies towards the trio of multilateral platforms (United Nations, WTO and the European Union).

Theoretical Framework

Scholars in International relations have developed a number of theories for the study of multilateralism, such as constructivism, dependency theory and realism. Constructivism focuses on identity, norms, and shared ideas among states at the international level. BRICS presents itself as a platform for developing countries at the international level or the voice of the Global South in promoting sovereignty among nations, non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other nations, and a promoter of development-oriented norms at the international level. At the UN, BRICS have continued to advocate for multipolarity as a normative value by insisting on a world order that represents the diversity of global cultures. In the WTO, BRICS usually promotes equity and justice in trade rules. With the EU, BRICS has continued to challenge the Eurocentric narratives or posture of the EU, while still engaging in norm diffusion on issues of trade and climate change. For instance, most BRICS communiqués have continuously sought to promote “inclusive global governance” and the significance of cultural diversity in the developmental processes (Acharya, 2017).

However, Dependency theory argues that international capitalism benefits core (developed) states while underdeveloping the periphery (developing). BRICS policies often seek to reverse this imbalance in the International Political Economy. At the UN, BRICS demand more equitable representation for the Global South. At the WTO, BRICS also challenge contemporary neocolonial trade structures and demand technology transfer to the Global South. BRICS engagement with the EU involves resisting trade conditionalities and pushing back against exploitative investment practices. For instance, BRICS countries continued to criticise the EU’s carbon border tax as a strategy of green protectionism that has continued to undermine the industrial growth of developing nations (Bond, 2016).

According to realism, states act mainly in pursuit of power and national interest at the international level. Therefore, BRICS nations seek to challenge the dominance of Western powers in notable international institutions. For instance, at the United Nations, BRICS have been advocating for the reform of the United Nations Security Council in order to allow for the expansion of a permanent member seat that will ensure the representation of developing nations and balance Western hegemony. In the WTO, BRICS often defends the “trade interests” of the developing nations by opposing the European Union and the United States’ agricultural subsidies. It is important to note that BRICS engagement with the European Union is a clear reflection of its strategic hedging cooperation, where



interests align particularly in the area of trade and climate, but at variance with the issue of a multipolar world order. Today, Russia and China have continued to veto many United Nations Security Council resolutions aimed at promoting Western hegemony, which has further demonstrated that states pursue their strategic interests under realist persuasion (Mearsheimer, 2001).

From the foregoing analysis of constructivism, dependency theory and realism to the study of BRICS policies towards the UN, WTO and EU. This study recognises the relevance of constructivism and dependency theory as a useful framework for analysis of BRICS policies towards the UN, WTO and EU, but considers realism as the most effective theoretical framework to explain BRICS policies towards the UN, WTO, and EU due to the BRICS strategic pursuit of influence and security in the international arena. For instance, at the UN, BRICS' continuous advocacy for the reform of the UN Security Council is not merely for inclusivity, but to gain hard institutional power (Stuenkel, 2015). Again, at the WTO, BRICS have continued to pursue national economic interests, protecting domestic industries and forming coalitions to counterbalance Western trade dominance. In BRICS relations with the EU, the bloc has continued to act pragmatically by engaging in partnerships that are beneficial but outrightly rejects Western overreach, perceived issues such as human rights or sanctions. On the whole, realism as a framework of analysis in this study captures the geopolitical calculations, strategic alignments, and power-maximising behaviour that underpin BRICS's multilateral engagements at the international level.

Methodology

The data for this study were collected from secondary sources of data such as textbooks, journal articles and BRICS statements, resolutions, communiqués, and policy documents. Content analysis was used to examine statements, resolutions, communiqués, and policy documents from BRICS. This includes the BRICS joint statement on South Africa's admission on December 24, 2010; the Sixth BRICS Summit – Fortaleza Declaration from July 15, 2014; the 15th BRICS Summit Johannesburg II Declaration from August 24, 2023; the Third BRICS Summit Declaration from April 14, 2011; the Joint Declaration of the 15th BRICS Trade Ministers Meeting from May 21, 2025, World Bank, World Trade Organization, *Bali Ministerial Declaration* of December 7, 2013 and WTO Dispute Settlement Database (2023). These documents relate to the UN, WTO, and EU. They express support for multilateralism, call for reform, trade liberalisation, and protectionism, along with criticism of Western dominance and cooperation with the EU. The reason for using content analysis is that these primary official documents show how BRICS collectively states its positions. This approach ensures reliability instead of relying on secondary interpretations. Additionally, these documents come directly from official BRICS platforms, providing authentic insights into BRICS' stance. They also reveal how BRICS balances cooperative and confrontational attitudes toward global institutions.



BRICS Contribution to World Economic Growth in relation to G7

The BRICS is the acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, and the G7 consist of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, which represent two significant blocs shaping global economic dynamics. While the G7 symbolises the world's most advanced economies, the BRICS reflects a coalition of emerging powers from the Global South with increasing influence in global economic governance (Stuenkel, 2020).

Available statistics from the IMF show that in 2024, BRICS accounts for approximately 32% of global GDP on a purchasing power parity (PPP) basis, surpassing the G7's share of about 30% (IMF, 2024). The key drivers of BRICS' growth are China and India, which have continued to post higher economic growth rates relative to G7 nations, benefiting from large populations, expanding markets, and a relatively youthful population (World Bank, 2023). In contrast, G7 economies face structural constraints such as ageing populations and slower productivity growth, though they remain dominant in innovation, capital markets, and institutional governance (OECD, 2022).

It is pertinent to note that BRICS has made notable strides in creating alternative financial mechanisms, such as the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), aimed at reducing dependency on Western-led institutions like the IMF and World Bank (Cooper, 2021). This reflects BRICS' strategic ambition to shape a multipolar global financial system. Meanwhile, G7 countries maintain control over major global financial and trade institutions and dominate international aid, investment, and technology flows (Kirtan, 2018).

Moreover, while the G7 emphasises preserving the liberal international order, promoting democracy, and addressing transnational threats such as climate change and pandemics, BRICS emphasises reforming the global governance architecture to reflect the voices of developing nations. The bloc has consistently called for restructuring the UN Security Council and the WTO to make them more representative and equitable (Thakur, 2020).

Despite divergent approaches, both blocs are indispensable to global economic growth. BRICS contributes by fueling development-led growth, especially across Asia and Africa, while the G7 contributes through advanced industrial capacity, financial innovation, and global regulatory standards. Therefore, rather than competition alone, enhanced cooperation between BRICS and G7 is crucial for addressing shared global challenges, including climate change, digital transformation, and geopolitical instability (Gasper et al., 2023). Table 1 below shows the share of BRICS contribution to World Economic Growth (2024-2029).

Table 1 shows that the BRICS contribution to World Economic Growth between 2024 and 2029 is estimated at 44.3 per cent. Brazil is expected to contribute 1.8 per cent, Russia 1.8 per cent, India 14.2percent, China 21.2 per cent, South Africa 0.3 per cent, Egypt 1.5 per cent, Iran 0.9 per cent, Saudi Arabia 1.5 per cent, United Arab Emirates 0.7 per cent and Ethiopia 0.4 per cent. From the above data, India and China will jointly contribute 35.4 per cent to global economic growth between 2024 and 2029, making both countries the largest BRICS countries that will contribute the largest share to Global Economic Growth. The implication is that India and China's contributions to Global Economic Growth will surpass that of other BRICS countries combined. This shows that



India and China's economies remain critical in the development of Global Economic Growth.

Table 1. Showing BRICS Contribution to World Economic Growth (2024-2029)

Country	Percentage
Brazil	1.8%
Russia	1.8%
India	14.2%
China	21.2%
South Africa	0.3%
Egypt	1.5%
Iran	0.9%
Saudi Arabia	1.5%
United Arab Emirates	0.7%
Ethiopia	0.4%
Total	44.3%

Source: IMF, World Economic Outlook (April 2024)

Table 2 shows that the G7 nations' Contribution to Global Economic Growth between 2024 and 2029 is estimated at 20.1 per cent of Global Economic Growth. Japan is expected to contribute 1.8 per cent, France 1.4 per cent, the United Kingdom 1.5 per cent, Germany 1.7 per cent, Canada 1.0 per cent, Italy 0.8 per cent and the United States 11.9 per cent. This further shows that the United States will be the largest contributor among the G7 nations to Global Economic Growth. The implication is that the United States will contribute 50percent of the entire Global Economic Growth of the G7 nations.

Table 2. Showing G7 Contribution to World Economic Growth (2024-2029)

Country	Percentage
Japan	1.8%
France	1.4%
United Kingdom	1.5%
Germany	1.7%
Canada	1.0%
Italy	0.8%
United States	11.9%
Total	20.1%

Source: IMF, World Economic Outlook (April 2024)

However, comparative analysis of data from Table 1 and Table 2 shows that the BRICS contributions to Global Economic Growth are estimated at 44.3 per cent, while the G7 is estimated at 20.1percent. Other nations that are neither BRICS nor G7 are expected to contribute 35.6percent of Global Economic Growth. A critical analysis of the above data shows that the percentage of BRICS to Global Economic Growth will surpass that of the G7 in the years under review. The implication of the above findings shows that BRICS,



especially India and China, remain key drivers of future Global Economic Growth based on the present assessment of their economic performance.

Consequently, a comparative analysis of BRICS and G7 contributions to Global Economic Growth in 2001, 2023 and 2060 projections is shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3. Showing a Comparative Analysis of G7 and BRICS Contributions to Global GDP in PPP terms (2001, 2023 and 2060)

YEAR	G7	BRICS
2001	43%	19%
2023	30%	32%
2060	19%	45%

Source: OECD (2022), IMF (2024)

Table 3 above shows that in 2001, the contributions of G7 to Global GDP in Purchasing Power Parity terms were estimated at 43 per cent, while the BRICS was 19 per cent. In 2023, the contributions of the G7 to Global GDP in Purchasing Power Parity terms were estimated at 30 per cent, while BRICS nations' contributions to Global GDP in Purchasing Power Parity terms rose from an earlier 19 per cent to 32 per cent, with a 13 per cent increase. In 2060, it is projected that G7 contributions to Global GDP in Purchasing Power Parity terms will decrease to 19 per cent, showing an 11 per cent decrease. The implication of the above findings shows that BRICS contributions to Global GDP in Purchasing Power Parity terms by 2060 surpass that of the G7 by 26 per cent. This will, among other things, help the BRICS nations to influence global trade.

BRICS and G7: Contrasting Institutional Strategies at the United Nations

The United Nations (UN) is a multilateral platform where global powers pursue their strategic interests through institutional engagement. Both the BRICS and the G7 use the UN to shape multilateral decision-making. However, their institutional strategies differ greatly because of their geopolitical positions, economic priorities, and governance views. The G7's approach at the UN is rooted in its commitment to liberal internationalism and multilateral cooperation. It aims to uphold the rules-based order established after World War II. The G7 countries, on the other hand, have consistently taken advantage of their economic and financial strength to support UN programmes by focusing on issues of democracy promotion, human rights protection, humanitarian aid, and ensuring sustainable development (Luckhurst, 2020). For example, G7 members often coordinate their voting patterns and diplomatic efforts in the UN General Assembly and the Security Council. They often push for resolutions related to humanitarian intervention, peacekeeping, and sanctions, especially in situations like Syria and North Korea (Patrick, 2019). The BRICS strategy relies on working together, with the G7 acting as an informal group to unify their positions before formal negotiations at the UN.

BRICS focuses on challenging Western dominance and promoting a multipolar world within the UN system. BRICS countries coordinate their actions to push back against what they see as Western overreach, especially regarding issues like sovereignty, intervention,



and development financing. For instance, BRICS states often dispute the G7's view of the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P). They argue that more emphasis should be placed on state sovereignty and non-interference (Stuenkel, 2015). In the UN Security Council, Russia and China, both permanent members of the United Nations, have frequently used their veto power to overturn resolutions led by the West that are detrimental to the interests of the developing countries. Meanwhile, Brazil, India, and South Africa have continued to advocate for reforms in the Security Council to give more voice to emerging powers (Hodzi, 2019). This strategy reflects BRICS' long-term goal of reforming institutions to balance global governance.

Another significant difference lies in their approaches to development and economic governance. The G7 focuses on financing through established UN-related institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In contrast, BRICS promote alternatives such as the New Development Bank (NDB), which operates both alongside and outside traditional UN financing pathways. At the level of the UN, BRICS states have continued to highlight the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities," especially in climate talks, to point out the differences between developed and developing countries (Bhandari, 2021). This approach contrasts with the G7's method of setting binding global standards and stressing accountability.

On the whole, the G7 uses the UN to strengthen and promote the liberal political and economic world order. Meanwhile, BRICS treat the UN as a platform to challenge Western dominance by calling for the reform of the UN Security Council and support for a multipolar world. These differing strategies reflect not only the tension between established and emerging powers but also the ongoing struggle over the legitimacy and future of global governance.

BRICS and G7: Divergent Policy Instruments at the WTO

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) is the main global forum for managing international trade among states. However, different economic groups around the world have shown significant differences in their strategies towards the WTO. Two of the most notable groups are the Group of Seven (G7), which consists of the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Canada, Japan and Italy and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). Both groups work with the WTO to influence outcomes that serve their interests, but they use different policy strategies that reflect their foundations, priorities, and political world views.

The first major difference in this strategy is in how they coordinate their activities and their institutional structures. For instance, BRICS is a loose group of emerging economies without a binding treaty or central institutions. This institutional setup of BRICS allows for more flexible but less unified policy tools at the WTO. Recently, BRICS members have increased their efforts to align their trade policies through initiatives such as the Contact Group on Economic and Trade Issues (CGETI), which facilitates trade-related discussions about WTO reforms and global trade challenges (CPPR, 2024). Although BRICS joint statements often highlight the need to restore the WTO's Appellate Body and strengthen the dispute resolution system, to reflect priorities that benefit developing countries (BRICS Research Institute, 2025). In contrast, the G7 consist of seven industrialised



nations that are committed to a strong level of policy and institutional unity. G7, during their annual summits, regularly release detailed statements that act as signals for political intentions and agreement before WTO meetings (CLAWS, 2024). Therefore, while BRICS relies on coordinated statements and flexible arrangements, the G7 uses formal declarations that are integrated into multilateral discussions.

Another difference is that BRICS and G7 focus on institutional reform versus political messaging. BRICS uses its policy tools to push for structural changes in the WTO that promote inclusiveness and uphold the special rights of developing countries. This is clear in BRICS' common position and calls for a fair, rules-based trading system and the reinforcement of developing countries' rights under WTO agreements (InfoBRICS, 2024; BRICS Research Institute, 2025). However, the G7 uses its strategies mainly to set agendas. Its statements often express shared values and indicate negotiation positions such as supporting flexibility in intellectual property for public health without making binding commitments (SDG Knowledge Hub, 2023). This contrast shows that BRICS focuses on the WTO's longevity and reform, while the G7 prioritises immediate political influence.

BRICS employs formal mechanisms such as summit resolutions, joint statements, and task groups to advocate for systemic reforms of the WTO, such as reviving the dispute resolution system (The BFT, 2024). In contrast, G7 strategies mainly come in the form of non-binding statements, serving as platforms for political expression rather than practical plans. For instance, during the WTO talks about trade-related aspects of intellectual property (TRIPS), the G7 utilised summit statements to support flexibility for vaccine licensing within the Doha Declaration, while steering clear of institutional commitments that could limit their freedom (SDG Knowledge Hub, 2023).

In conclusion, BRICS and the G7 approach the WTO in fundamentally different ways. BRICS focuses on institutional reform, inclusiveness, and priorities for developing countries, using coordinated statements and specific working groups. Meanwhile, the G7 relies on non-binding statements and expressions of intent to signal priorities and maintain negotiating strength without making structural changes to the multilateral system. These differences mirror their broader roles in the global economy: The goal of BRICS is to adjust the activities of the WTO to address the challenges developing nations face, while the goal of the G7 is to maintain influence and reinforce its leadership in the contemporary international system.

BRICS and G7 Strategies Compared to the EU

The European Union (EU) represents one of the unique models of governance that combines shared sovereignty with collective decision-making at the international level. In contrast, both BRICS and G7 pursue noticeably different strategies in terms of structure, policies, and approaches. While the G7 often supports EU initiatives, BRICS tends to oppose EU-led agendas, focusing instead on multipolarity, sovereignty, and development.

The G7 shares many similarities with the EU, as both are rooted in liberal democracy, international rules, and open market policies (Kirton, 2020). This common ground



enables both the G7 and the EU to coordinate their efforts at the United Nations (UN) and World Trade Organisation (WTO). The G7 and EU policies often confront issues such as human rights, climate change, and global economic stability (Smith, 2021). For instance, the EU's Green Deal and the G7's commitments to climate finance often support one another, highlighting their shared goals for sustainability (Youngs & Panchulidze, 2020).

Besides, both the G7 and EU most often engage in diplomatic efforts to impose sanctions against states that threaten international stability, as seen in their unified response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Keukeleire & Raube, 2022). Therefore, the G7 acts as a supporter of the EU's liberal strategies. In contrast, BRICS adopt a different strategy that often contests the EU's leadership in setting norms. At the same time, the EU focuses on regulatory influence and spreading standards, especially in areas such as climate policy, trade, and human rights. BRICS emphasises sovereignty, non-interference, and development cooperation (Stuenkel, 2020).

BRICS also differs from the EU in economic and trade governance. The EU functions as a cohesive customs and regulatory block, while BRICS operates as a loose alliance without formal binding structures, relying on cooperation between governments (Roberts, Armijo, & Katada, 2018). This flexibility allows BRICS members to resist EU regulatory influence, such as the European Green Deal's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which BRICS views as protectionist and a threat to development goals (Bastos, 2022). Thus, BRICS focuses on strengthening its bargaining power, forming coalitions with other developing nations, and resisting EU influence.

Another major difference is the internal cohesion of these groups. The EU operates under a supranational model with binding institutions such as the European Commission and European Court of Justice. In contrast, both BRICS and G7 depend on intergovernmental consensus. However, the G7 is more aligned with the EU because of shared values and overlapping membership. On the other hand, BRICS deals with internal issues, such as tensions between China and India and South Africa's limited economic influence, which hinder its ability to effectively counter EU strategies (Hurrell, 2018). These internal challenges diminish BRICS' capacity to present a strong alternative to the EU, despite its emphasis on multipolarity.

In conclusion, the institutional strategies of BRICS and the G7 differ sharply when compared to the EU. The G7 supports EU liberal values, promoting a rules-based order based on democracy, free markets, and collective security. In contrast, BRICS challenges the EU's normative power by advocating for sovereignty and development priorities, while also facing hurdles related to internal unity. This positions the G7 as a natural ally for the EU in global governance, while BRICS serves as both a challenger and a counterbalance to European influence.

BRICS policies towards the United Nations

The policies of BRICS towards the United Nations have consistently focused on a comprehensive reform of the United Nations (UN) system, with reference to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), in ensuring that there is fairer representation and



decision-making space for developing nations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil et al., 2025). These policies are anchored on the long-standing perceived imbalance in the United Nations governance structures, where five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council popularly known as the P5 which include the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China has veto power, while emerging economies especially BRICS nations such as India, Brazil, and South Africa lack permanent representation at the United Nations Security Council.

One of the classic examples of this advocacy was seen at the 2011 BRICS Summit in Sanya, China, where BRICS member states unequivocally demonstrated their support for India, Brazil, and South Africa's aspirations for permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council. This further strengthens BRICS's position on the need to reform the UNSC to reflect contemporary geopolitical realities of the 21st century (BRICS Summit Declaration, 2011).

Similarly, at the 16th BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia, in 2024, BRICS member states further reaffirmed their support and commitment to adherence to the United Nations Charter and advocated for Palestine's full participation in the UN, based on the two-state solution framework, which reflects past collective positions of BRICS on peace and security in the Middle East. This is in line with the BRICS long-standing position on the need for respect for international law and multipolar world order, as demonstrated during the 2014 Fortaleza Declaration, where BRICS leaders called for the United Nations to take decisive actions on issues relating to international security seriously while resisting unilateral military interventions by any state within the international system (BRICS Fortaleza Declaration, 2014).

Moreover, BRICS states, through their Foreign Ministers forum, have emphasised transparent, merit-based processes for senior UN appointments and equitable geographic representation, highlighting the need for diversity and preventing domination by a single bloc or country within the UN Secretariat (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil et al., 2025). A clear example of this principle was the BRICS joint statement in 2021, during António Guterres' reappointment as UN Secretary-General, where BRICS nations demanded a more open selection process for top UN roles, ensuring that developing nations' candidates were really considered (UN News, 2021).

However, progress has been negligible due to entrenched resistance from the current permanent members of the UN Security Council, who are reluctant to dilute their veto powers. Furthermore, internal divergences within BRICS, such as China's hesitancy to endorse India's UNSC ambitions, have slowed down cohesive lobbying efforts. As a result, BRICS has been more successful in raising awareness and keeping the reform debate active rather than enacting structural changes within the UN.

Conclusively, BRICS' unified stance has been instrumental in keeping the reform agenda alive at the UN General Assembly, where they often coordinate votes to reflect Global South interests (Stuenkel, 2020). Yet, critics have argued that internal contradictions like China's reluctance to endorse Japan or India's full UNSC ambitions are continuing to undermine the bloc's effectiveness (Alden & Vieira, 2018).



BRICS policies towards the World Trade Organisation (WTO)

The BRICS nations support the World Trade Organisation (WTO) as a critical institution for a transparent, rules-based, inclusive, and non-discriminatory international trading system, which has been encouraging. However, BRICS policies towards the WTO have been that it must evolve to reflect the shifting balance of economic power toward emerging markets. This position was reinforced during the 2011 Sanya BRICS Summit in China, where member states requested that WTO rules better accommodate Global South interests, especially in agriculture and intellectual property rights (BRICS Summit Declaration, 2011). BRICS have also consistently criticised protectionist practices by the Global South, such as agricultural subsidies by the European Union and the United States, which distort trade and harm Global South exporters. For instance, during the 2013 Bali Ministerial Conference, BRICS countries advocated for food security provisions to protect farmers in countries like India and Brazil from the effects of subsidy-driven dumping by the Global South (WTO, 2013).

During the September 2024 BRICS Trade Ministerial Meeting in Moscow, BRICS nations agreed to create a policy coordination platform within the WTO to strengthen the voice of the developing nations in negotiations on digital trade, agricultural subsidies, and trade facilitation (Infobrics, 2024). This strategy was anchored on earlier efforts made by the bloc, such as the BRICS Trade and Investment Cooperation Framework Agreement of 2015, which sought to enhance coordination on trade rules, supply chains, and investment standards. The 2014 Fortaleza Declaration also underlined BRICS opposition to unilateral trade measures such as sanctions and tariffs, arguing that they undermine the spirit of WTO-based multilateralism (BRICS Fortaleza Declaration, 2014).

In a related development, in May 2025, the BRICS Joint Declaration, by its Trade Ministers, called for the restoration of the WTO Appellate Body, which has been redundant since 2019 due to the United States' refusal to appoint new judges (BRICS Trade Ministers, 2025). The implication of this is that the redundancy of the WTO Appellate Body that has affected international trade has been seen in the U.S.-China tariff disputes (2018-2020) (Hoekman & Mavroidis, 2021). At present, U.S.-China tariff disputes have continued to hinder international trade due to the absence of a fully functioning appellate mechanism at the WTO. Today, BRICS nations have continued to argue that such dysfunction undermines the predictability of the current international trade order, which they seek to reinforce through multilateral dialogue and legal reform.

It is pertinent to note, however, that India and China have worked within BRICS to block harmful agricultural subsidy policies pushed by G7 nations, by building on joint positions right from the 2013 Bali Ministerial Conference (WTO, 2013). Nevertheless, BRICS has not yet achieved significant reforms at the WTO due to resistance from developed economies, especially the U.S. and EU, which prioritise bilateral trade deals and new digital trade rules (Hoekman & Mavroidis, 2021). The creation of a BRICS policy coordination platform during the 2024 Moscow summit is a step in the right direction, but the efficacy of this mechanism remains untested in shaping future WTO negotiations (Infobrics, 2024).

At the WTO level, BRICS has emerged as a defender of multilateral trade frameworks, opposing unilateral trade measures like the U.S.-China trade tariffs that disrupted global



markets. The bloc's insistence on reviving the Appellate Body and resisting protectionism was reaffirmed during the 2025 BRICS Trade Ministers' Meeting, where members stressed that any meaningful global trade order must give developing countries greater bargaining power. However, while BRICS' influence is evident in maintaining pressure for WTO reform, the organisation's slow pace of structural change and the rise of regional trade agreements (RTAs) have hindered concrete results. A classic example is the failure of WTO negotiations on agricultural subsidies, where, despite BRICS' joint stance, developed nations like the U.S. and EU have continued to maintain high domestic support for their farmers, undermining fair competition.

BRICS policies towards the European Union

It is pertinent to note that BRICS does not engage directly with the European Union (EU) as a bloc in official forums; rather, each BRICS member nation relates to the EU independently. In recent years, BRICS declarations have continuously shown strong criticism of EU-imposed Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanisms (CBAM), which were alleged as disguised protectionist measures that negatively affect competitive exporters from BRICS countries (India Today analysis of summit communiqué, 2025; Drishti IAS, 2025). Similarly, CBAM, which imposes tariffs on imports based on their carbon emissions, is seen by BRICS members, especially India, China, and South Africa, as an unfair trade barrier that disproportionately targets the Global South, which is still reliant on carbon-intensive industries. For instance, during the 2021 UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), India and China jointly denounced unilateral carbon tariffs, arguing that they violated the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" under the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 2021). Similarly, during the 2023 Johannesburg BRICS Summit, BRICS leaders warned that green tariffs such as the EU's CBAM risked "weaponising climate policies" against emerging markets, especially in steel and cement exports from Brazil, India, and South Africa (BRICS Johannesburg Declaration, 2023).

It is also important to note that BRICS does not name the EU explicitly in formal UN or WTO statements; it has condemned unilateral trade barriers, including CBAM and other green tariff mechanisms that seek to undermine the principles of fair trade and **equitable** development for developing nations (BRICS Trade Ministers, 2025). In related development, South Africa's Trade Minister, in a 2024 statement, criticised CBAM as violating WTO non-discrimination rules and announced plans to coordinate with BRICS partners to challenge the measure at the WTO level (Mail & Guardian, 2024). This replicates BRICS' wider opposition to climate-related trade barriers that disproportionately penalise the Global South while ignoring the historical emissions of advanced economies, especially the U.S, Britain, France, Italy and Canada.

BRICS' policies have largely centred on criticising climate-linked trade barriers, notably the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). BRICS leaders, particularly from India, China, and South Africa, have described CBAM as a form of "green protectionism" that penalises exporters from the Global South. For example, during the 2023 Johannesburg Summit, BRICS leaders issued a joint statement warning that CBAM and similar measures could increase the economic marginalisation of developing economies, particularly in industries like steel and cement. While these criticisms have drawn



international attention to the equity implications of climate trade policies, BRICS has not been able to significantly influence EU policymaking, which remains firmly committed to its Green Deal agenda. Instead, BRICS countries have been compelled to negotiate bilaterally with the EU rather than as a unified bloc, limiting their collective leverage.

BRICS has publicly condemned WTO policies, but the bloc lacks a coordinated enforcement mechanism to counter EU regulations because BRICS member states relate individually to the EU, which remains legally entrenched within the EU Green Deal framework. BRICS member states have instead resorted to bilateral negotiations with the EU, such as Brazil's talks on agricultural exports, rather than confronting the EU as a unified bloc (Drishti IAS, 2025). Today, BRICS has successfully framed CBAM as protectionist in global debates, but it is yet to alter the EU's implementation of such measures.

The EU has often favoured bilateral trade agreements instead of dealing with BRICS as a whole. Its agreements with Brazil, through Mercosur, and India, through free trade negotiations, show this preference (Meunier & Nicolaïdis, 2019). In contrast, BRICS does not have a unified trade policy. The differing economic models of its members, such as China's state-led capitalism, India's protectionism, and Brazil's focus on agricultural exports, make it hard to negotiate collectively (Hopewell, 2021). The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) impacts BRICS exporters directly, and their reactions differ. Russia views it as protectionism, Brazil sees it as a threat to its agricultural competitiveness, while China is cautiously negotiating compliance (Oberthür & Dupont, 2021). This lack of a unified response weakens BRICS's ability to challenge the EU's trade power.

In terms of security, the EU focuses on multilateral conflict prevention, human rights, and a rules-based order. BRICS, on the other hand, prioritises sovereignty and non-interference (Stuenkel, 2020). Russia's conflict with the EU over Ukraine and China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific have put a strain on their relationship. India, although a BRICS member, tends to side more with the EU and the U.S. on security issues in the Indo-Pacific (Bava, 2021). South Africa, meanwhile, lacks the economic or military strength to significantly impact EU security policy. These differences show that while BRICS can criticise the EU's liberal interventionism, it does not have the internal unity needed to offer a clear alternative security approach.

Beyond climate issues, BRICS views the EU's agenda on human rights, democracy promotion, and digital governance as Eurocentric and sometimes intrusive (Lucarelli & Fioramonti, 2010). For instance, Russia and China resist EU proposals for internet reforms based on data privacy and transparency because they see these as threats to digital sovereignty (Barkin & Senn, 2018). Similarly, Brazil and South Africa have mixed feelings. They support the EU's commitment to multilateralism but oppose conditions tied to development aid. Therefore, while the EU is seen as a strong "norm entrepreneur," BRICS' viewpoint is divided along geopolitical and developmental lines.

The internal divisions within BRICS greatly weaken its bargaining power against the EU. Rivalries between China and India, driven by border disputes and competition for EU trade and investment, hinder coordinated economic diplomacy (Hurrell, 2018). Russia's distancing from Europe since 2014 complicates collective negotiation. Moscow often tries



to undermine EU positions instead of working together. South Africa, despite representing BRICS' Global South identity, has limited influence because of its small economy, which reduces its ability to guide shared positions (Taylor, 2020). These divisions mean that while BRICS wants to balance EU influence in global governance, its fragmented strategies leave it reactive rather than proactive.

On the whole, the EU's relationship with BRICS involves both structural inequalities and disagreements over norms. The EU prefers bilateral deals over working collectively with BRICS, has an assertive security approach, and displays more normative power, highlighting its institutional maturity in comparison to BRICS. Yet, BRICS struggles to resolve its internal conflicts, especially between China and India or Russia and the West, diminishing its negotiating power against the EU. In the end, while the EU shows cohesive institutional strategies, BRICS is limited by conflicting national interests, undermining its effectiveness as a counterbalance in the global arena.

Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis, BRICS policies toward the United Nations (UN), World Trade Organisation (WTO), and European Union (EU) are strategically aligned with the bloc's long-term goal of fostering a multipolar global order and protecting the economic and political interests of the developing nations. This approach represents a collective rejection of Western dominance in global institutions such as the UN, WTO and EU and a push for greater inclusion of emerging economies in global decision-making processes. Despite this strategic alignment, the efficacy of these policies remains mixed, as structural and geopolitical barriers continue to limit tangible outcomes. Therefore, this study has been able to provide a comparative analysis of BRICS policies towards the UN, WTO and EU, which were lacking in a single study in existing literature. Thus, this study has further strengthened existing literature within the framework of BRICS policies towards multilateral institutions such as the UN, WTO and EU in contemporary times.

Recommendations

- a. BRICS should intensify coordinated advocacy for United Nations Security Council reform, present a unified front for fairer World Trade Organisation rules that support development, and engage the European Union through strategic diplomacy that promotes mutual respect and counters protectionist tendencies.
- b. The United Nations should engage BRICS more directly in institutional reform dialogues to enhance inclusivity and legitimacy in global governance.
- c. The World Trade Organisation should facilitate more balanced trade negotiations by recognising BRICS' collective demands for fairer rules that reflect the developmental needs of emerging economies.
- d. The European Union should adopt a pragmatic partnership approach with BRICS by focusing on shared interests like climate change, digital economy, and global health, despite geopolitical divergences.



- e. BRICS should establish a permanent conflict-resolution and policy coordination mechanism to manage internal disparities in political systems, economic priorities, and strategic interests, thereby strengthening collective coherence and effectiveness.

References

- Acharya, A. (2017). *After liberal hegemony: The advent of a multiplex world order*. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 31(3), 271–285. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S089267941700020X>
- Alden, C., & Vieira, M. (2018). *The BRICS and the reform of global governance*. *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 25(3), 293–307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2018.1526704>
- Barkin, J. S., & Senn, M. (2018). *The politics of the earth: Environmental discourses and international institutions*. Oxford University Press.
- Bastos, M. A. (2022). *Climate policy, trade disputes, and the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism: Implications for emerging economies*. *Journal of World Trade*, 56(4), 623–645.
- Bava, U. (2021). India–EU relations: The quest for strategic convergence. *International Affairs*, 97(2), 345–362.
- Bhandari, S. (2021). *Emerging Powers and the United Nations: Contestation and Reform*. Routledge.
- Bond, P. (2016). *BRICS: An anti-capitalist critique*. Pluto Press.
- BRICS Fortaleza Declaration, (2014, July 15). *Sixth BRICS Summit – Fortaleza Declaration*. BRICS Information Portal. <https://www.brics2024.gov.br/fortaleza-declaration>
- BRICS Johannesburg Declaration, (2023, August 24). *15th BRICS Summit Johannesburg II Declaration*. BRICS Information Centre. <http://www.brics.utoronto.ca>
- BRICS Research Institute (2025). Summit resolutions. Retrieved from <https://www.bricsri.co.za/summit-resolutions>
- BRICS Summit Declaration, (2011, April 14). *Sanya Declaration – Third BRICS Summit*. BRICS Information Portal. <https://www.brics2024.gov.br/sanya-declaration>
- BRICS Trade Ministers (2025, May 21). *Joint Declaration of the 15th BRICS Trade Ministers Meeting*. BRICS Brasil. <https://brics.br/en/news/brics-approves-joint-declaration-for-fairer-more-inclusive-global-trade>
- BRICS (2010, December 24). *BRICS joint statement on the admission of South Africa*. <https://www.brics.utoronto.ca/docs/101224-leaders.html>
- Centre for Public Policy Research (CPPR), (2024). A call for WTO reform: What can G20 and BRICS do? Retrieved from <https://www.cppr.in/articles/a-call-for-wto-reform-what-can-g20-and-brics-do>



CLAWS (2024), BRICS vs. G7: Can they truly be compared? Retrieved from <https://claws.co.in/brics-vs-g7-can-they-truly-be-compared>

Cooper, A. F. (2021). *BRICS and the New Development Bank: Engagement and influence in global financial governance*. Routledge.

Drishti, IAS. (2025, July 8). *BRICS Summit Highlights: Criticism of the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM)*. Drishti IAS. <https://www.drishtiias.com>

Gaspar, D., Portocarrero, A. V., & St. Clair, A. L. (2023). *The future of global development cooperation: Between BRICS and the West*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Hodzi, O. (2019). *The End of China's Non-Intervention Policy in Africa*. Springer.

Hoekman, B., & Mavroidis, P. C. (2021). *To Save the WTO, Reform the Dispute Settlement Mechanism*. Peterson Institute for International Economics. <https://www.piie.com>

Hopewell, K. (2016). *Breaking the WTO: How emerging powers disrupted the neoliberal project*. Stanford University Press.

Hopewell, K. (2018). US-China conflict in global trade governance: The new politics of agricultural subsidies at the WTO. *Review of International Political Economy*, 25(3), 393–419. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2018.1459780>

Hopewell, K. (2021). The BRICS in the WTO: Emerging powers, development states and the challenge to global trade governance. *Third World Quarterly*, 42(6), 1163–1180.

Hurrell, A. (2018). Beyond BRICS: Power, pluralism and the future of global order. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 32(1), 89–101.

IMF (International Monetary Fund), (2024). *World Economic Outlook: April 2024 – Global divergence and resilience*. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEQ>

IMF (2024). *World Economic Outlook April 2024: Global divergence and resilience*. International Monetary Fund. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEQ>

India Today analysis of summit communiqué (2025, July 9). *BRICS leaders denounce the EU's CBAM as disguised protectionism*. India Today. <https://www.indiatoday.in>

InfoBRICS, (2024). BRICS agree on policy coordination in the WTO. Retrieved from <https://infobrics.org/post/42116/news/society/news/political-cooperation>

Infobrics, (2024, September 3). *BRICS Agree on Policy Coordination in the WTO*. Infobrics. <https://infobrics.org/post/42116/news/society/news/political-cooperation>

International Monetary Fund (2024, April). *World Economic Outlook: Steady but Slow – Resilience Amid Divergence*. Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund. Retrieved from <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEQ/Issues/2024/04/16/world-economic-outlook-april-2024>

Keukeleire, S., & Raube, K. (2022). The EU and the G7: Partners in defending liberal order? *Global Affairs*, 8(2), 145–162.

Kirton, J. (2020). *The G7 and global governance: The summit decade*. Routledge.



Kirton, J. J. (2018). *G7 and global governance: Capacity, legitimacy, and reform*. Routledge.

Lucarelli, S., & Fioramonti, L. (2010). *External perceptions of the European Union as a global actor*. Routledge.

Luckhurst, J. (2020). *G7 and G20 as Global Steering Committees for the UN*. *Global Governance*, 26(4), 553–571.

Mail & Guardian, (2024, June 15). *South Africa calls the EU's Carbon Border Mechanism a WTO violation*. Mail & Guardian. <https://mg.co.za>

Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Meunier, S., & Nicolaïdis, K. (2019). The EU as a trade power. In C. Hill, M. Smith & S. Vanhooacker (Eds.), *International Relations and the European Union* (pp. 275–298). Oxford University Press.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. (2025, May 21). *Declaration of the Presidency of the Meeting of Foreign Ministers of BRICS Member States on Global Governance Reform*. <https://www.gov.br/mre/pt-br>

O'Neill, J. (2001). *Building better global economic BRICs* (Global Economics Paper No. 66). Goldman Sachs. <https://www.goldmansachs.com/insights/archive/archive-pdfs/build-better-brics.pdf>

Oberthür, S., & Dupont, C. (2021). The European Union's international climate leadership: Towards a grand climate strategy? *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28(7), 1095–1114.

OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development), (2022). *Global plastics outlook: Policy scenarios to 2060*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/aa1edf33-en>

OECD (2022). *Economic Outlook 2022: Volume I*. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. <https://www.oecd.org/economic-outlook>

Patrick, S. (2019). "When the System Fails: G7, G20, and the Future of Global Order." *Council on Foreign Relations Report*.

Roberts, C., Armijo, L. E., & Katada, S. N. (2018). *The BRICS and collective financial statecraft*. Oxford University Press.

SDG Knowledge Hub (2023). G7 leaders set out priorities ahead of WTO ministerials. Retrieved from <https://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/policy-briefs/g7-leaders-set-out-priorities-ahead-of-wto-ministerials>

Sinha, M., & Mishra, R. (2020). Role of BRICS in WTO dispute settlement: Evidence from panel decisions. *Journal of International Trade Law and Policy*, 19(1), 25–43. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JITLP-12-2019-0081>

Smith, K. E. (2021). *The European Union, the G7 and global governance*. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 59(1), 45–62.

Stuenkel, O. (2015). *The BRICS and the future of global order*. Lexington Books.



Stuenkel, O. (2020). *Post-Western world: How emerging powers are remaking global order*. Polity Press.

Stuenkel, O. (2020). *The BRICS and the future of global order*. Lexington Books.

Taylor, I. (2020). South Africa and BRICS: A critical appraisal. *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 27(1), 1–18.

Thakur, R. (2020). *The United Nations, peace and security: From collective security to the responsibility to protect*. Cambridge University Press.

The BFT (2024). Unlocking WTO potentials in changing geopolitical world*. Retrieved from <https://thebftonline.com/2024/11/19/unlocking-wto-potentials-in-changing-geopolitical-world>

UN News, (2021, June 8). *Guterres secures second term as UN Secretary-General following reappointment by the General Assembly*. United Nations. <https://news.un.org>

UNFCCC (2021, November 13). *COP26 Outcomes on Climate Tariffs and Trade*. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. <https://unfccc.int>

World Bank (2023). *Global economic prospects, June 2023*. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/global-economic-prospects>

World Trade Organisation, (2013, December 7). *Bali Ministerial Declaration*. WTO. <https://www.wto.org>

WTO Dispute Settlement Database, (2023). *List of disputes and complaints by country*. World Trade Organisation. https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/dispu_e/dispu_by_country_e.htm

Xue, C., & Wang, H. (2021). Reforming global governance: The BRICS' strategy at the United Nations. *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 14(3), 357–379.

Youngs, R., & Panchulidze, E. (2020). *EU foreign policy in a fragile world*. Carnegie Europe.

THE ARCTIC COUNCIL AND THE RUSSIAN SPHERE OF INFLUENCE: DECONSTRUCTING THE RUSSIAN SOFT POWER AND ECONOMIC AMBITIONS IN THE ARCTIC

SHASHI BHUSAN KR VISHWAKARMA

Shashikumar4215@gmail.com

PhD Student, Department of Politics and International Studies, School of Social Sciences & International Studies, Pondicherry University (India). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0894-2652>

Abstract

The Arctic Council (AC) is the single credible institution for collaboration in the Arctic, and the growing geopolitical tensions could disrupt the Council's functions, as military affairs fall outside the scope of the Council's jurisdiction. The Russian Federation (RF) holds a significant stake in the High North (HN) due to its extensive coastline and arctic population. Russia's Arctic policy is rooted in a blend of economic ambition, sovereignty assertion, and development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR). Notwithstanding RF's hard power potential, Moscow projects itself as a proactive partner for cooperation in the HN. The paper argues that despite militarisation, Russia's AC engagement reflects a preference for soft power to advance economic goals, though Ukraine-related tensions risk undermining this strategy as it portrays the RF as an aggressor in international politics. Moscow's exclusionary sphere of influence (SOI), rooted in Cold War politics, resists non-Arctic state involvement. The principal question that this paper seeks to address is why Russia asserts its sovereignty in the HN context while simultaneously favouring the use of its soft power strategies. The paper applies a thematic literature review and qualitative analysis of AC statements to draw its inference that Russia showcases soft power through environmental initiatives and inclusion of Indigenous Communities (IC) in the AC. The paper analyses the Russian ambitions in the Arctic amid the heating geopolitics and tries to substantiate its central objective to explore the Russian soft power politics in the region. The paper also evaluates various dimensions of Russian interests in the Arctic and its behaviour inside the AC. Furthermore, the paper navigates through the idea of a Russian SOI through a constructivist perspective. The growing importance of the Arctic and the Russian hegemony in the region necessitate a comprehensive analysis of the AC and its relation with the RF.

Keywords

Arctic Council, Russia, Geopolitics, Soft Power, Sphere of Influence.

Resumo

O Conselho do Ártico (AC) é a única instituição credível para a colaboração no Ártico, e as crescentes tensões geopolíticas podem perturbar as funções do Conselho, uma vez que os assuntos militares estão fora do âmbito da jurisdição do Conselho. A Federação Russa (RF) detém uma participação significativa no Extremo Norte (HN) devido à sua extensa costa e população ártica. A política ártica da Rússia tem as suas raízes numa mistura de ambição



económica, afirmação da soberania e desenvolvimento da Rota do Mar do Norte (NSR). Apesar do potencial de poder duro da RF, Moscovo projeta-se como um parceiro proativo para a cooperação no HN. O artigo argumenta que, apesar da militarização, o envolvimento da Rússia no AC reflete uma preferência pelo poder brando para promover objetivos económicos, embora as tensões relacionadas com a Ucrânia possam comprometer essa estratégia, uma vez que retratam a RF como um agressor na política internacional. A esfera de influência (SOI) excludente de Moscovo, enraizada na política da Guerra Fria, resiste ao envolvimento de Estados não árticos. A principal questão que este artigo procura abordar é por que razão a Rússia afirma a sua soberania no contexto da HN, ao mesmo tempo que favorece o uso das suas estratégias de poder suave. O artigo aplica uma revisão temática da literatura e uma análise qualitativa das declarações da AC para chegar à conclusão de que a Rússia demonstra o seu poder suave através de iniciativas ambientais e da inclusão das Comunidades Indígenas (IC) na AC. O artigo analisa as ambições russas no Ártico em meio ao aquecimento da geopolítica e tenta substantiar seu objetivo central de explorar a política de soft power russa na região. O artigo também avalia várias dimensões dos interesses russos no Ártico e seu comportamento dentro do AC. Além disso, o artigo explora a ideia de uma SOI russa através de uma perspectiva construtivista. A crescente importância do Ártico e a hegemonia russa na região exigem uma análise abrangente do CA e da sua relação com a RF.

Palavras-chave

Conselho do Ártico, Rússia, Geopolítica, Soft Power, Esfera de Influência.

How to cite this article

Vishwakarma, Shashi Bhusan Kr (2025). The Arctic Council and the Russian Sphere of Influence: Deconstructing the Russian oft Power and Economic Ambitions in the Arctic. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 342-357. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.18>

Article submitted on 24th May 2025 and accepted for publication on 11th September 2025.





THE ARCTIC COUNCIL AND THE RUSSIAN SPHERE OF INFLUENCE: DECONSTRUCTING THE RUSSIAN SOFT POWER AND ECONOMIC AMBITIONS IN THE ARCTIC

SHASHI BHUSAN KR VISHWAKARMA

Introduction

The Arctic Ocean (AO) is surrounded by eight sovereign states known as the Arctic Eight (AE); therefore, these states form the membership of the Council. The AC features a unique characteristic in its operation, as six organisations, representing IC in the region, are part of the Council as its permanent members and possess full negotiation and decision-making rights in the Council's affairs, and their participation is facilitated by a separate secretariat inside the Council.¹ The AC was established in 1996 with the initial aim to foster a multi-stakeholder approach towards sustainable development in the region, primarily focused on environmental protection, but the Council progressively expanded its scope of operation by including socio-cultural and economic issues under its mandate, specifically excluding military affairs in the HN (Barry et al., 2020). The initial purpose of the Council was to promote cooperation on environmental issues, which is why military affairs were strategically excluded from the Ottawa Declaration. The Council has been a successful forum for negotiation and discussion since its formation, despite major transformations in international power politics; scholars explain this success through the concept of Arctic Exceptionalism,² but rising geopolitical tension in the region may reduce the importance of the central inter-governmental organisation in the region, as the Council witnessed a two-year suspension due to the Ukraine war (Brimmer, 2023). In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, all seven other AC's members paused the function of the Council in protest against Putin's so-called "special military operation."³

After the sudden transformation of the Cold War competition with the collapse of the Soviet Union, its successor, Russia, assumed the status of a regional power. Moscow

¹ Ottawa Declaration. (1996). Arctic Council. <http://hdl.handle.net/11374/85>

² The concept of "Arctic Exceptionalism," rooted in Mikhail Gorbachev's 1987 Murmansk speech, positions the Arctic as a "zone of peace," perceiving the High North as a region insulated from global conflict and political tensions.

³ Read more about the Council's suspension and its survival at "How and Why the Arctic Council Survived Russia's Invasion of Ukraine" <https://jordanrussiacenter.org/blog/how-and-why-the-arctic-council-survived-russias-invasion-of-ukraine>



maintains an undisputed notion of a SOI in the Arctic due to its geographical proximity and regional power structure, and is often hesitant to expand the stakeholding of the Arctic to non-Arctic nations (Pay & Calvo, 2020). The RF has the largest coastal territory in the Arctic from the Barents Sea in the west to the far-east Bering Sea with over 2.5 million Arctic inhabitants. The Russian ambitions are multifaceted yet overlapping in the Arctic, as the development of NSR is crucial for shipping facilities, which can be utilised for both international and domestic transportation of natural resources present in the Arctic, such as petroleum, minerals, and coal (Lamazhapov & Moe, 2025). International and regional players may gradually come to acknowledge the sovereignty of the RF in the region. This recognition could be driven by the growing global demand for resources and the advantages of the NSR, which is under Moscow's control and offers a shipping route that is 40 per cent shorter than the current international shipping route.

The Russian interests in the HN are driven by the economic benefits of the region, but Putin's aspiration to develop the Arctic as a reliable resource hub certainly requires a combination of both hard and soft power projection. Due to its large population and vast geography, Russia is the most significant stakeholder in the Arctic based on a state-centric evaluation. As a result, Russian policies can greatly influence the overall physical and political landscape of the HN. It is crucial for Russia to maintain a delicate balance in this strategic environment, as any escalation could jeopardise Moscow's interests in the region. (Paul & Swistek, 2022). The RF and AE are willing to cooperate on the environment issue since the thawing ice can dilute the special privilege provided in Article 234 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea⁴ (UNCLOS) for the governance of the Arctic to littoral states (Gavrilov et al., 2019). The growth and advancement of IC can act as a source of soft power for the RF in the HN, since the growing civilian-military infrastructure can be justified by the cause of IC.

The Russian stakes in the Arctic, the significant role of the AC as a negotiation forum and the necessity to evaluate the current geopolitics of the Arctic require comprehensive studies emphasising the subtle aspects of Russian strategies in the Arctic. Existing literature often portrays Russia as a disruptor of regional arrangements due to the expanding military presence of the Russian Federation in the Arctic. However, this paper aims to analyse the Russian aims and ambitions, providing a plausible explanation for their actions. This paper argues that Russia leverages the AC to project soft power, advancing its economic ambitions while navigating sovereignty concerns. To substantiate this, Section 2 examines Russia's tangible interests; Section 3 analyses its SOI; Section 4 evaluates soft power dynamics within the AC; and Section 5 assesses challenges from rising geopolitics.

The paper analyses the Russian policies and behaviour in the Arctic, specifically focusing on the various narratives surrounding the soft and hard power of the RF. The paper

⁴ "Coastal States have the right to adopt and enforce non-discriminatory laws and regulations for the prevention, reduction and control of marine pollution from vessels in ice-covered areas within the limits of the exclusive economic zone, where particularly severe climatic conditions and the presence of ice covering such areas for most of the year create obstructions or exceptional hazards to navigation, and pollution of the marine environment could cause major harm to or irreversible disturbance of the ecological balance. Such laws and regulations shall have due regard to navigation and the protection and preservation of the marine environment based on the best available scientific evidence." Article 234 of UNCLOS



emphasises the Russian cooperation with the AC as the central argument, mainly because of geo-economic reasons, which foster the concept of Russian soft power in the Arctic. The paper also discusses the SOI and how heating geopolitics in the Arctic can be detrimental to Moscow's soft power. The paper uses a thematic literature review with qualitative content analysis complemented with data and narratives to substantiate the main argument of the paper. The paper mainly relies on the AC statements for its inferences while assimilating data from other valid secondary sources. The major limitation of the paper lies in the omission of detailed Russian military strength and its growing presence in the region, which is justified by the delimited focus of the paper on soft power analysis. The current literature on the area demonstrates a clear abundance in the military and strategic analysis; therefore, this paper seeks to uncover the low-political area that influences the Russian behaviour in the region.

Russian tangible interests and power projection in the Arctic

The tangible interests of the RF in the Arctic largely lie in the natural resources and the NSR. Owing to the increasing demand for oil and gas in the international market, the hydrocarbon reserves in the Arctic are becoming a global attraction. As per a report, approximately 13 per cent of the world's undiscovered oil reserves may be located in the Arctic, alongside 30 per cent of liquid natural gas and 20 per cent of natural gas liquids found in this offshore region. The report estimates that there are 90 billion barrels of undiscovered oil, 1,669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 44 billion barrels of natural gas liquids in the Arctic, with 90 per cent of these resources situated within the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of the Arctic states, indicating a potential for conflict in the area (Gautier et al., 2009). Despite growing concerns regarding climate change, the availability of non-traditional sources of energy remains significantly lower than that of fossil fuels on a global scale (Vishwakarma, 2025a). The Arctic also has a rich mineral reserve, including rare earths and critical minerals, which are essential for various emerging technologies such as semiconductors, wind turbines, electric vehicles, etc (Moe, 2020). These hydrocarbons and minerals are largely situated in the 'Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation' (AZRF),⁵ which offers leverage to Russia in the international market (Bortnikov et al., 2015). Figure 1 illustrates the concentration of placer minerals along Russia's Arctic coast, aligning with NSR development zones and reinforcing resource-transport synergies.

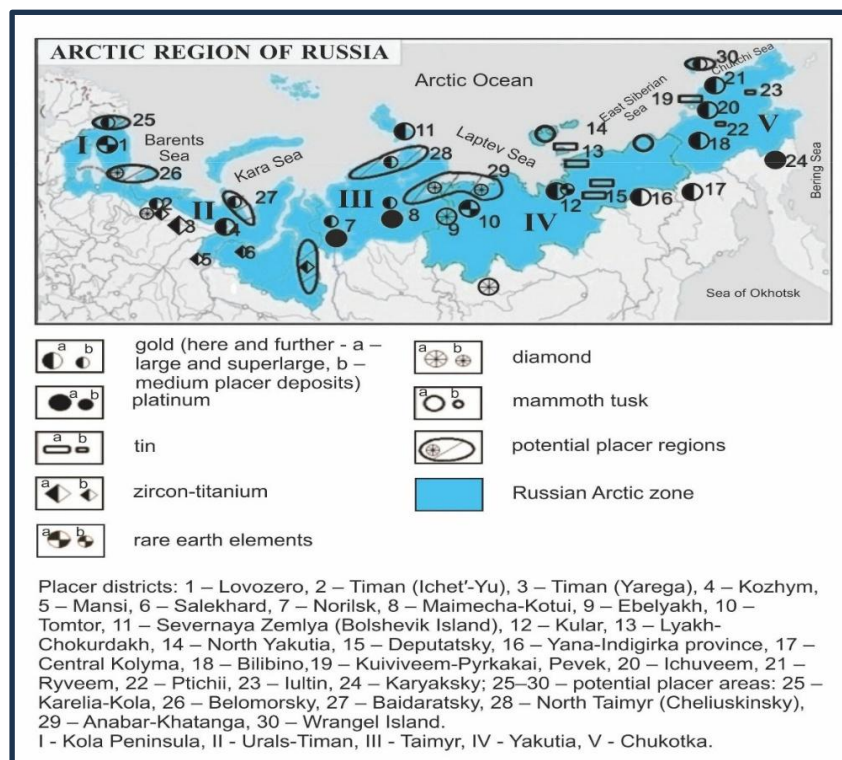
The NSR is another evident priority for Moscow in the Arctic, as it desires to develop the route as an international shipping passage. The NSR via the Northeast Passage (NEP) connects the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean and is 40 per cent shorter than the current international shipping route. The increasing traffic of international cargo and frequent supply-chain disruptions at key choke points in global shipping routes via Panama and the Suez Canal significantly enhance the need for infrastructure development and heighten the international appeal of these passages (Ziomecki, 2024). The receding ice cover in the Arctic has the potential to fully operationalise the NSR, while the variance in

⁵ Russian coastal territories along the Arctic Ocean comprising 10 regions. Read more about AZRF at <https://erdc.ru/en/about-azrf-old/>



the weather and ice thickness, official permits and navigational rules, the Russian ice-breaking fee, and insurance cost are hovering challenges that RF needs to address. Additionally, the Russian Federation has signed a \$29 billion deal for the development of the NSR, aiming to increase shipping traffic sevenfold, reaching up to 240 million metric tons of cargo by 2035 compared to 2022 levels. NSR holds strategic and economic significance for Russia since it can be used for the transportation of fuel and minerals present in the Arctic, and Moscow can benefit from the international shipping as it remains under the territorial jurisdiction of Russia (Moe, 2020).

Fig. 1. Placer mineral deposits in AZRF⁶



The RF's coastal size and proximity, along with Russian civilian and military infrastructures (including ice-breaking facilities) in the Arctic, make it the biggest player in the region (Pay & Calvo, 2020). While having the extensive boundary along the AO, Moscow intends to expand it further and claim a large part of the Arctic. Article 76 of UNCLOS provides for the delineation of the EEZ⁷ up to 200 nautical miles, but it can be extended further by submitting scientific evidence of continental shelf extension. The RF

⁶ Bochnova, A., Lalomov, A., & LeBarge, W. (2021). Placer mineral deposits of Russian Arctic zone: Genetic prerequisites of formation and prospect of development of mineral resources. *Ore Geology Reviews*, 138, 104349. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oregeorev.2021.104349>

⁷ "The exclusive economic zone is an area beyond and adjacent to the territorial sea, subject to the specific legal regime established in this Part, under which the rights and jurisdiction of the coastal State and the rights and freedoms of other States are governed by the relevant provisions of this Convention" Article 56 of UNCLOS



has submitted a bid in the CLCS⁸ to claim approximately 70 per cent of the AO, which includes two out of three major ridges in the whole region.⁹ The Russian lawfulness in the Arctic showcases its desire to strengthen the economic base of resources and NSR through non-conflictual means, since it will be harmful to the RF's interests if geopolitics heats up in the region.¹⁰

The Russian sphere of influence and sovereignty concerns

The concept of SOI gained popularity during the Cold War era of superpowers' competition, but the idea can be traced back to the Athenian and Spartan empires or the reign of the Qing dynasty in China. The definition of SOI involves *control* and *exclusion* as Jackson (2019, p. 255) defines SOI as a "hierarchical structure, the construction and maintenance of which results from a practice involving two specific features: some amount of *control* over a given territory or polity by a foreign/outside actor, especially as regards third-party relations, and *exclusion* of other external actors from exercising that same kind of control over the same space". Russia considered the Arctic as a region of its SOI, as the other AE states have limited presence in the region, compared to an all-season-capable Russian fleet¹¹. The RF obviously has both qualities outlined by Jackson (2019) in the region. In order to comprehend the Russian SOI in the Arctic, a proper acquaintance with the Cold War politics is essential in international politics. According to Grajewski (2017), the RF succeeded the Soviet Union after its disintegration in 1991, which conferred the status of a regional power to Russia, but the image of a great power remained intact in the ruins of the USSR;¹² the Russian assertion in the Arctic can be explained through the pride and prestige it attaches to regional politics to demonstrate its international stature (Pay & Calvo, 2020). Godzimirski (2008) states that Russian behaviour in the Arctic is characterised by "the syndrome of lost empire". This syndrome fuels Moscow's sovereignty assertions, evident in its CLCS bid for 70% of the AO.

The Russian sovereignty assertion in the HN has two motivations: firstly, Russia's urgency to safeguard its territorial integrity in the region, including the jurisdiction over the NSR, and secondly, the desire to manifest its dominance in the global arena (Grajewski, 2017). Moscow is constantly increasing its presence in the Arctic in the name of national security and the advancement of the Arctic population through building civilian and military infrastructure, including reviving old military and nuclear facilities. These infrastructures can be used for military purposes in times of crisis, and Russia's insecurities regarding its claim of the Arctic, mainly due to NSR and resources, are

⁸ 'Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf' established by UNCLOS as a body to consider the coastal states' submission for claim of EEZ under Article 76 and provide technical and scientific advice if required by states.

⁹ Three major ridge systems in the AO: the Alpha-Mendelev Ridge, the Lomonosov Ridge, and the Gakkel Ridge.

¹⁰ Read Prof. Hossain's 'Russia's Proposed Extended Continental Shelf' at <https://polarconnection.org/russia-extended-continental-shelf-arctic/>

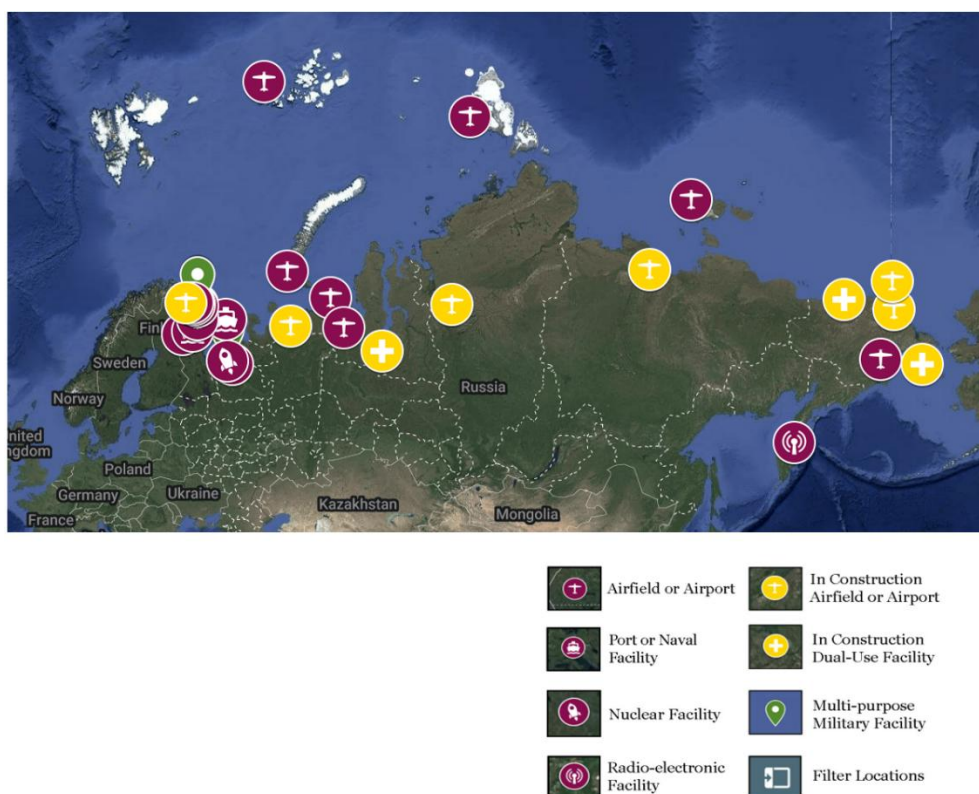
¹¹ Read more at Cold Realities: Russia's Arctic Security actions and implications <https://cpsps.gmu.edu/2024/05/20/cold-realities-russias-arctic-security-actions-and-implications/>

¹² The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), also known as the Soviet Union, consisted of Russia and 14 surrounding countries from 1922 to 1991.



evident in its preparedness for any conflict in the region (Paul & Swistek, 2022). Figure 2 shows the Russian military bases; it's evident that Russia has been expanding its military infrastructure to the HN.

Fig 2.



Source: ASP¹³

The majority of the bases are situated in the Murmansk Oblast region; however, development of other sites can be observed as well. According to Laruelle (2020), Russian behaviour in the Arctic can be categorised into three categories: (a) Proactive power, (b) Status quoist power, and (c) Reluctant power. Here, Russia is prepared to cooperate on environmental issues, IC, search and rescue operations, and scientific explorations as a proactive partner, while it is hesitant to expand the Arctic stakeholding to non-Arctic states or the idea of freedom of navigation (control over NSR).

Between these two extreme behaviours, Russia wants to preserve the status quo regarding its sovereignty over its territorial boundary, NSR, and EEZ, including various claims over the expansion of EEZ in the CLCS. The tripartite claim over the Lomonosov Ridge involves Russia, Canada, and Denmark, highlighting a dispute over economic

¹³ Franiok, N. (2020, May 4). *Russia's Arctic Military Bases* | ASP. American Security Project. <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/russian-arctic-military-bases/>



interests and geopolitical ambitions. Notwithstanding Russia's increasing militarisation for reasons of national security, Gavrilov (2019) argues that Moscow genuinely seeks peace and cooperation in the Arctic. This is because any disruption in the region would harm Russia's own interests, particularly in light of its ambitions to commercialise the NSR and exploit natural resources. These cooperative gestures can be observed in (a) peaceful settlements of border issues with Norway and the United States, (b) an active role in founding the AC, and BEAC¹⁴ and the *Polar Code*¹⁵ (c) enacting special legislation for environmental protection and IC, (d) advocacy for confidence-building and arms reduction, and (e) being lawful to CLCS and its mandates rather than being aggressive towards the Arctic. The RF held its first congress of indigenous people in 1990, and that became the foundation of RAIPON. The RAIPON is a permanent participant in the AC and is associated with multiple international organisations with a goal "to protect Indigenous Peoples' human rights, defend their legal interests, assist in solving environmental, social, economic, cultural and educational issues and to promote their right to self-governance"¹⁶.

The Arctic Council and Russian soft power politics

The term soft power was coined by Prof. Nye, and he defines it as "the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2017). He further elaborates on his concept as an analytical tool, serving as a complement to address the gaps in traditional power analysis. For example, the USSR sought to promote communism internationally by heavily investing in propaganda, youth movements, and scientific initiatives during the Cold War¹⁷. Lee (2011), in his work, defines soft power with three foundational elements: cognitive, affective, and normative. The international image/reputation of a particular nation falls under the cognitive sphere, the affective sphere is linked with the perception of that particular state excluding its national power, and the international legitimacy of the state comes under the normative dimension of its soft power. While the RF stands strong in terms of the first two dimensions in the Arctic, the Ukraine war dilutes the legitimacy of its actions. However, if I observe the Russian behaviour exclusively in the Arctic, it fulfils all three dimensions of soft power. This section analyses the Russian behaviour and its soft power politics inside the Council.

The RF was the founding member of the AC through the Ottawa Declaration, and Russia's perception of the AC has been positive since its establishment, mainly because of its inclusive and multidimensional approach towards the Arctic in comparison to the other translational entities in the HN (Voronchikhina, 2019). Russia has actively collaborated within the AC, though its behaviour in the AO region has often been criticised as

¹⁴ The Barents Euro-Arctic Council, or the Barents Council, is the official body for inter-governmental co-operation in the Barents Region.

¹⁵ Read more on International Maritime Organisation (IMO) website, "IMO's International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters (Polar Code) is mandatory under both the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL)."

¹⁶ Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), founded in 1990, is a Russian national organisation which represents the IC of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of Russia. Read more at <https://arctic-council.org/about/permanent-participants/raipon/>

¹⁷ Read What Is Soft Power? At <https://education.cfr.org/learn/reading/what-soft-power>



disruptive to regional harmony. Despite this criticism, Russia has previously expressed its willingness to upgrade the Council into a full-fledged international organisation that includes military matters under its mandate (Sergunin, 2021). The Council's intergovernmental and consensus-driven structure, lacking any enforcement mechanisms for its directives, frequently results in stalemate or a lack of adherence among its members (Barry et al., 2020).

According to Melchiorre (2017), Russian strategies in the Arctic are often categorised as those of a revisionist power. However, a closer examination reveals that the Russian Federation (RF) functions more as a reformist power. This is evident in its active cooperation on various fronts, including economic initiatives, cultural exchanges, the question of IC, and environmental protection. Through these avenues, Russia seeks to exert its soft power influence in the region, fostering collaboration rather than confrontation, and AC serves as a silver platform where Russia can demonstrate its diplomatic skills. The qualitative content analysis of several statements by the Russian official in the AC meeting suggests that the RF desires peace in the Arctic. The Russian Chairmanship of the AC in 2021 delineates several key priorities aimed at enhancing the Council's effectiveness and addressing pertinent issues in the region. These priorities include: (a) safeguarding the Arctic population through initiatives focused on resilience and sustainable development; (b) advancing environmental protection efforts; (c) promoting socio-economic development; and (d) strengthening the operational capacity and cohesiveness of the AC itself¹⁸.

Ministerial statements by the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs (MFA) during the 8th AC meeting held in 2013 outline Russia's vision for collective efforts to support the Arctic population, the development of the Arctic transport route, and the sustainable exploitation of marine resources. In 2015 (9th AC Meeting), Russian MNRE¹⁹ Donskoy emphasised the necessity for cooperation in the Arctic and a collaborative venture to advance the transport, industry, communication, and tourism. He added that "Russia has prepared the National Inventory Report for Black Carbon and Methane Emissions in the Russian Arctic as part of fulfilling its international commitments under the AC. Project Support Instrument to support environmental projects of the AC, which took place last year. Russia contributed 5.0 million EUR to this fund in 2014, and the same amount has already been allocated this year"²⁰. The Lavrov in 2017 referred to the "Arctic as a territory of peace" and expressed concerns over the partial suspension of the Council between 2014 and 2017²¹. This suspension was caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The RF restated its adherence to the goal of sustainable development of the Arctic in line with the 'United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', and prioritising the energy security of the Eurasian continent²².

¹⁸ *Russian Chairmanship*. Arctic Council. <https://arctic-council.org/about/previous-chairmanships/russian-chairmanship-2/>

¹⁹ The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment of the Russian Federation

²⁰ Ministerial meeting in Iqaluit, Canada, April 24-25, 2015, <https://oarchive.arctic-council.org/collections/91f8c212-514e-4a82-b956-d255c905eb83>

²¹ Ministerial meeting in Fairbanks, USA, May 11, 2017. Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, at the 10th AC Meeting. <https://arctic-council.org/about/previous-chairmanships/>

²² Ministerial meeting in Rovaniemi, Finland, May 6-7, 2019. Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, at the 11th AC Meeting. <https://arctic-council.org/about/previous-chairmanships/>



The Russian minister again in 2021 stressed the need for multilateral cooperation for climate change, IC, and energy security through the strengthening of the AC.²³ The transition of chairmanship from the RF to Norway and the survival of the AC were major events of global significance as the Russia-Ukraine war started in February 2022, which paused the cooperation in the HN, along with various operations of the Council. Notwithstanding the disruption, the Council gradually reinitiated its functions with the inception of Norway in the chair (Andreeva & Rottem, 2024). The 14th edition of AC's meeting was recently convened, during which a Russian official emphasised the RF's commitment to fostering a peaceful Arctic region. He cited Putin's statement made in Murmansk, declaring the Arctic a "Territory of Dialogue."²⁴ He expressed that "we have consistently advocated for equitable cooperation in the region and are ready to collaborate not only with Arctic States but with all who share a like-minded commitment to ensuring a stable and sustainable future, along with the ability to make balanced decisions." Furthermore, he expressed firm conviction regarding AC's potential to restore the "spirit of cooperation"²⁵. Russia clearly envisages a collective approach towards the Arctic, inclusive of observer states.

The strategic outlook of the RF regarding the future of the Arctic region suggests a preference for soft power strategies over hard power assertiveness. This approach aligns with Russia's broader interest in securing its stakes in the resources and upgrading the infrastructure of the NSR (Sergunin, 2017). The RF mainly focuses on the low political areas of the Arctic to gather support for its ambitious plans (Østhagen, 2016), and the above analyses highlight the Russian Federation's effective use of soft power in the AC, enhancing its influence through diplomatic engagement and scientific collaboration. Moscow, notwithstanding rising geopolitical tensions in the region, adheres to the idea of "Arctic Exceptionalism" or "zone of peace" inside the Council, which serves its strategic interests in the region. The guiding theme of the chairmanship, as cited by the RF in 2021, was "Responsible Governance for Sustainable Arctic."²⁶ Russia played an important role in founding 'the Rovaniemi process/the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy' (AEPS) in 1991, as it considers the AEPS as vital for the identification and institutionalisation of collaboration areas for multilateral engagement in the region.²⁷ The RF was instrumental in the formulation of the AC's 'Strategic Plan 2021 to 2030,' which outlines seven distinct objectives for sustainability in the HN²⁸.

²³ Ministerial meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland, May 20, 2021. Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, at the 12th AC Meeting. <https://arctic-council.org/about/previous-chairmanships/>

²⁴ 6th International Arctic Forum: https://forumarctica.ru/en/?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F

²⁵ Fourteenth Meeting of the Arctic Council in Tromsø, Norway, May 12th 2025. Senior Arctic Official of the Russian Federation: H.E. Vladislav Maslennikov at the 12th AC Meeting. <https://arctic-council.org/about/previous-chairmanships/>

²⁶ Russian Chairmanship 2021-2023 at <https://arctic-council.org/about/previous-chairmanships/russian-chairmanship-2/>

²⁷ 'The Arctic year book' at <https://arcticyearbook.com/arctic-yearbook/2016/2016-commentaries/186-from-inspiration-to-action-from-action-to-institution-some-early-interventions-of-arctic-collaboration-in-sustainable-development>

²⁸ 'Arctic Council Strategic Plan' at <https://arctic-council.org/explore/goals/>



Rising geopolitics and decline of the Council: A setback for Russian soft power

The geopolitical landscape of the Arctic, once marked by a period of harmony and cooperation even during the Cold War, is now facing emerging competitive and conflictual dynamics due to climate-induced ice melting, posing significant challenges to regional stability and the AC's capacity to maintain a balanced order (Dyck, 2024). Although the current market prices for hydrocarbons and minerals are not conducive to resource exploitation in the Arctic, the thawing ice in the HN is gradually making these reserves accessible and decreasing extraction costs (Lindholt & Glomsrød, 2012). The shipping routes and the resources brought strategic significance to the Arctic, depleting the spirit of "the Arctic exceptionalism", where the chances of conflict have increased due to the clash of interests (Pechko, 2025). The growing presence of the AE in the AO is a clear sign of their insecurities regarding the stakes in the region. Russia is strengthening its northern fleet with icebreakers (including nuclear-powered) with various plans such as Project 22220 and Project 10510. NATO activities in the Arctic have increased due to Russia's growing military presence in the region.

The recent termination of the bilateral agreement between Russia and Finland, subsequent to Finland's accession to NATO, indicates a significant shift in regional dynamics. The former neutral states of Sweden and Finland have joined NATO, marking a significant shift in international politics that poses a direct challenge to Russia's SOI, as seven out of eight regional states are now part of a historically rival alliance (Brimmer, 2023). This shift is further exacerbated by the Russian military buildup in the Arctic, the suspension of the AC due to the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, and Russia's withdrawal from the BEAC. Collectively, these developments suggest a diminishing capacity for the AC to effectively uphold peace and foster cooperation within the region (Dyck, 2024). Furthermore, the rising interest of non-Arctic states in the AO complicates the strategic equation, especially the growing Chinese presence in the HN. China issued a white paper in 2018, declaring itself a 'near-arctic country', which demonstrates its ambitions to gain a share in the Arctic resources and so the so-called "polar silk road"²⁹. The Chinese investment in the multiple AE states and growing proximity with Russia are perceived negatively by the US and its allies. Chinese equity acquisition in the Yamal peninsula, a joint venture of 'Power of Siberia 2 Pipeline' and investment in the NSR, along with naval collaboration, certainly indicates a Sino-Russian convergence of interests in the region (Khanna, 2025). While the bilateral Sino-Russian cooperation is positive on the economic front, China's NSR investments contradict Russia's exclusionary SOI rhetoric, alienating AE and weakening its 'Arctic for Arctic states' soft-power narrative.

According to Lamazhapov and Moe (2025), the war in Ukraine has significantly damaged Russia's reputation as a cooperative partner within the Council. This decline in trust was particularly evident when seven AC member states collectively suspended their participation, and two non-aligned countries opted to join NATO, along with various economic sanctions from Western nations. Speculation about Russia's potential withdrawal from the Council was rampant, as predictions about the new 'Arctic Seven'

29

China's

Arctic

Policy.

https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm



came to light, and there was growing interest in the implications and developments surrounding it³⁰. However, diplomatic relations began to improve with the subsequent leadership of Norway due to the role of non-state actors and a consensus-based institutional structure. The AC's strategic plan enabled Norway to maintain strategic autonomy while fulfilling its responsibilities on the Council and avoiding negotiations with Russia during its initial chairmanship period (Andreeva & Rottem, 2024). The imposition of Western sanctions aimed at isolating Russia has consequently fostered a closer relationship between China and Russia, evidenced by a series of bilateral agreements in several key areas, including military cooperation, navigation through the NSR, and resource extraction (Khanna, 2025).

The Russian behaviour in the Council, as discussed above, exhibits traits of a responsible player through frequent emphasis on dialogue, peace, sustainability, and development, and the RF's policy for the Arctic emphasises the need for a more collective approach towards the region. The RF policy for the Arctic evidently demonstrates a preference for soft power rather than assertiveness, despite its increasing military presence in the HN. The discourse surrounding melting ice in the Arctic and its geopolitical implications poses challenges for Russia's economic ambitions. This resource-conflict nexus is further exacerbated by Russia's 2007 flag planting on the seabed of the North Pole, the claim of the Lomonosov Ridge, and the frequent disputed bids for territorial extension (Carlson et al., 2013). Increased media coverage and scholarly attention on militarisation and potential conflicts may portray Russia as an aggressive actor, complicating its strategic goals and inviting international scrutiny (Vishwakarma, 2025b).

Conclusion

The physical and geo-strategic landscape of the Arctic has been dramatically transforming with the depleting ice cover, creating various narratives about the staking of the region's hydrocarbons, minerals, and transportation routes (Dyck, 2024). The massive global demand and the accessibility of resources with diminishing permafrost, complemented by the emerging cost-efficient technologies in the HN, create a perfect situation for the "Scramble for the Arctic", as sovereign states persistently seek to extend their territorial boundaries through frequent submissions to the CLCS despite hovering environmental concerns (Carlson et al., 2013; Grajewski, 2017; Paul & Swistek, 2022). Such reckless scrambling poses severe climatic implications for the physical environment, including rising sea levels, floods, and extreme weather conditions. In the geopolitical arena, these issues may lead to conflicts and even military confrontations as countries seek to protect their economic interests. Given the coastal length and sizable population in the AZRF, the RF is the biggest player in the region. The Russian presence in the Arctic portrays multiple narratives regarding its long-term objectives in the region. Reflecting upon the Russian interests, the tangible interests encompass resources and NSR, where Russia asserts its sovereignty and claims more than half of the AO through the extension of the continental shelf. These interests are backed by a further set of secondary

³⁰ Read 'Arctic Council Without Russia: A Spearhead for Democracy and Freedom of Expression' <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/arctic-council-without-russia-spearhead-democracy-and-freedom-expression>



interests: environmental protection, advancement of Arctic inhabitants, and preserving the status quo of regional dominance. The constructivist approach to the Russian policies towards the Arctic seems to identify the past experiences of a great power which drives the current ambitious regional power.

The AC has been a successful regional institution, but the success is not entirely attributed to its capabilities in the region; the isolation of the Arctic also contributes to the peaceful functioning of the Council, which aims to foster cooperation in low political areas such as sustainability, the Arctic inhabitants, socio-economic growth, etc. The Council is the major platform where Russia utilises its soft power diplomacy by showing its commitment towards Arctic cooperation and frequently designating HN as the "territory of dialogue." While the peaceful Arctic narrative is beneficial for the Russian economic interests, the rising geopolitics driven by shipping lanes and resources often contradicts the discourse of "Arctic Exceptionalism" (Dyck, 2024). The Russian invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, which led to the suspension of AC activities on two occasions, highlight a clear gap in Moscow's policy towards the Arctic. These military operations undermine Russia's soft power capabilities in the region. The Kremlin's increasing hard power presence in the HN may trigger counter-reactions from the other seven Arctic countries, as these developments are viewed with concern.

The territorial assertion and insecurities catalyse the militarisation of the Arctic. Notwithstanding Russia's unmatched military presence, the Russian policies always illustrate its preference towards soft power over hard power in the region. The growing attraction of the Arctic among the non-Arctic states is a cause of concern for the already delicate regional geopolitical balance. In the context of the AC, it is advisable for AE to prioritise sustainability in the region, despite external power dynamics. The sense of insecurity has increased following the Ukraine war, which means Moscow must balance its geopolitical ambitions with diplomatic engagements to effectively use its soft power within the Council. The Arctic governance should be reconfigured to better include non-Arctic interests, as the effects of Arctic degradation extend beyond the region.

References

- Andreeva, S., & Rottem, S. V. (2024). How and why the Arctic Council survived until now – an analysis of the transition in chairship between Russia and Norway. *The Polar Journal*, 14(1), 229–246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896x.2024.2342111>
- Barry, T., Davíðsdóttir, B., Einarsson, N., & Young, O. R. (2020). The Arctic Council: an agent of change? *Global Environmental Change*, 63, 102099. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2020.102099>
- Bochneva, A., Lalomov, A., & LeBarge, W. (2021). Placer mineral deposits of Russian Arctic zone: Genetic prerequisites of formation and prospects of development of mineral resources. *Ore Geology Reviews*, 138, 104349. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oregeorev.2021.104349>
- Bortnikov, N. S., Lobanov, K. V., Volkov, A. V., Galyamov, A. L., Vikent'ev, I. V., Tarasov, N. N., Distler, V. V., Lalomov, A. V., Aristov, V. V., Murashov, K. Y., Chizhova, I. A., &



- Chefranov, R. M. (2015). Strategic metal deposits of the Arctic Zone. *Geology of Ore Deposits*, 57(6), 433–453. <https://doi.org/10.1134/s1075701515060021>
- Brimmer, E. (2023, July 18). Changing geopolitics in the Arctic. *Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://www.cfr.org/report/changing-geopolitics-arctic-0>
- Carlson, J. D., Hubach, C., Long, J., Minter, K., & Young, S. (2013). Scramble for the Arctic: Layered Sovereignty, UNCLOS, and Competing Maritime Territorial Claims. *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 33(2), 21–43. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26995398>
- Dyck, C. (2024). On thin ice: The Arctic Council's uncertain future. *Marine Policy*, 163, 106060. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2024.106060>
- Gautier, D. L., Bird, K. J., Charpentier, R. R., Grantz, A., Houseknecht, D. W., Klett, T. R., Moore, T. E., Pitman, J. K., Schenk, C. J., Schuenemeyer, J. H., Sørensen, K., Tennyson, M. E., Valin, Z. C., & Wandrey, C. J. (2008). Assessment of Undiscovered Oil and Gas in the Arctic. *Science*, 324(5931), 1175–1179. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1169467>
- Gavrilov, V., Dremljuga, R., & Nurimbetov, R. (2019). Article 234 of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the law of the sea and reduction of ice cover in the Arctic Ocean. *Marine Policy*, 106, 103518. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2019.103518>
- Godzimirski, J. M. (2008). Putin and Post-Soviet Identity: building blocks and buzz words. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 55(5), 14–27. <https://doi.org/10.2753/ppc1075-8216550502>
- Grajewski, N. B. (2017). Russia's Great Power Assertion: Status-Seeking in the Arctic. *St Antony's International Review*, 13(1), 141–163. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26229126>
- Khanna, M. (2025, March 19). China and the Arctic: An overview. *ORF*. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/china-and-the-arctic-an-overview>
- Lamazhapov, E., & Moe, A. (2025). Russia's geopolitical position in the Arctic: What's new? *Strategic Analysis*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2025.2459571>
- Laruelle, M. (2020, March). Russia's Arctic Policy: A Power Strategy and Its Limits. *Institut français des relations internationales*. <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/russieneivisions/russias-arctic-policy-power-strategy-and-its-limits>
- Lee, S. (2011). The Theory and Reality of Soft Power: Practical Approaches in East Asia. In *Palgrave Macmillan US eBooks* (pp. 11–32). https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230118447_2
- Lindholt, L., & Glomsrød, S. (2012). The Arctic: No big bonanza for the global petroleum industry. *Energy Economics*, 34(5), 1465–1474. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eneco.2012.06.020>
- Melchiorre, T. (2017). Russia in the Arctic. Hard or soft power? *Europe Asia Studies*, 69(10), 1677–1678. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2017.1401822>



- Moe, A. (2020). A new Russian policy for the Northern Sea Route? State interests, key stakeholders and economic opportunities in changing times. *The Polar Journal*, 10(2), 209–227. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896x.2020.1799611>
- Nye, J. (2017). Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept. *Palgrave Communications*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.8>
- Østhagen, A. (2015). High North, low Politics—Maritime cooperation with Russia in the Arctic | Arctic Review on Law and Politics. *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, 7(1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.17585/arctic.v7.255>
- Paul, M., & Swistek, G. (2022). Russia in the Arctic. *Stiftung Wissenschaft Und Politik (SWP)*. <https://dx.doi.org/10.18449/2022rp03>
- Paul, M., & Swistek, G. (2022). Russia in the Arctic: Development plans, military potential, and conflict prevention. *Stiftung Wissenschaft Und Politik*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.18449/2022RP03>
- Pay, V. N., & Calvo, H. G. (2020). Arctic Diplomacy: A theoretical evaluation of Russian foreign policy in the High North. *Russian Politics*, 5(1), 105–130. <https://doi.org/10.30965/24518921-00501005>
- Pechko, K. (2025, January 25). Rising tensions and shifting strategies: The evolving dynamics of US Grand Strategy in the Arctic. *The Arctic Institute - Centre for Circumpolar Security Studies*. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/rising-tensions-shifting-strategies-evolving-dynamics-us-grand-strategy-arctic/>
- Sergunin, A. (2017a). Is Russia going hard or soft in the Arctic? *Wilson Quarterly*. <https://www.wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/into-the-arctic/is-russia-going-hard-or-soft-in-the-arctic>
- Sergunin, A. (2021). Thinking about Russian Arctic Council chairmanship: Challenges and opportunities. *Polar Science*, 29, 100694. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polar.2021.100694>
- Vishwakarma, S. B. K. (2025a). An evaluation of traditional and clean energy resources in the BRICS+ nations. *Climate and Energy*, 41(9), 9–16. <https://doi.org/10.1002/gas.22454>
- Vishwakarma, S. B. K. (2025b). Norway's threat perception of Russia and China: a study of Norwegian annual threat assessment focus from 2017–2024. *GeoJournal*, 90(1). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-024-11277-2>
- Voronchikhina, D. N. (2019). The Arctic Council as An International Forum of the State Cooperation: The Participation Of Russia. *ARS ADMINISTRANDI (Искусство Управления)*, 11(2), 306–329. <https://doi.org/10.17072/2218-9173-2019-2-306-329>
- Ziomecki, M. (2024, August 21). Russia's lifeline via the Northern Sea Route GIS Reports. *GIS Reports*. <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/northern-sea-route-russia-asia-sanction/#toc-pos-bulletpoints>

THE EMERGING POWER PARADIGM IN SOUTH AFRICA'S RELATIONS WITH INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

HAKAN AYDIN

hakanaydin@klu.edu.tr

Assistant Professor at Kırklareli University (Türkiye). ORCID: [0000-0002-5061-5631](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5061-5631)

Abstract

South Africa is one of the prominent countries of the African continent of 54 countries with its political and economic power. With the end of the apartheid regime, which was based on social segregation between 1948 and 1994, changes emerged both in domestic politics and foreign policy. The concrete indicator of this is the process of state-building with the new constitution. Peaceful, respectful of international law and human rights-based discourses resonated in the foreign policy of South Africa. In South Africa's relations with the countries of the continent, the concept of development is at the forefront, while emphasis is placed on the operation of solution mechanisms for the problems that the continent is likely to experience. In this regard, it is seen that the African Union (AU) has been restructured with the conditions of the period as it entered the 21st century. In this respect, it is clear that South Africa has adopted a mission for itself within the AU. In addition, South Africa's engagement with other organisations on a global level outside the continent is a result of its policy of being strong in international relations. Power categorisation in international relations can be evaluated within the framework of states' capacities and foreign policy relations. In particular, as a concrete example of the South-South dialogue, South Africa's rapprochement with Russia has important implications for the rising power paradigm, along with its relationship with China in line with BRICS. South Africa's neutral stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine has negatively affected its peaceful and normative stance. It is discussed in the article as an indicator of how idealism and pragmatism intersect in South African foreign policy. Foreign policy analysis is conducted through the use of qualitative research methods in this article. As a result, the rising power paradigm for South Africa has been tried to be understood in line with the foreign policy approaches of the Mandela, Mbeki, Zuma and Ramaphosa governments since 1994. It is critical for South Africa, whose status as a rising power is being questioned, to balance rather than bandwagoning the relations it has established.

Keywords

Emerging Power, South Africa, BRICS, Balance, Bandwagoning.

Resumo

A África do Sul é um dos países proeminentes do continente africano, composto por 54 países, devido ao seu poder político e económico. Com o fim do regime do apartheid, que se baseava na segregação social entre 1948 e 1994, surgiram mudanças tanto na política interna como na política externa. O indicador concreto disso é o processo de construção do Estado com a nova constituição. Discursos pacíficos, respeitadores do direito internacional e baseados nos



direitos humanos ressoaram na política externa da África do Sul. Nas relações da África do Sul com os países do continente, o conceito de desenvolvimento está em primeiro plano, enquanto a ênfase é colocada no funcionamento de mecanismos de solução para os problemas que o continente provavelmente enfrentará. A este respeito, verifica-se que a União Africana (UA) foi reestruturada de acordo com as condições do período em que entrou no século XXI. A este respeito, é evidente que a África do Sul assumiu uma missão para si própria no seio da UA. Além disso, o envolvimento da África do Sul com outras organizações a nível global fora do continente é o resultado da sua política de ser forte nas relações internacionais. A categorização do poder nas relações internacionais pode ser avaliada no âmbito das capacidades dos Estados e das relações de política externa. Em particular, como exemplo concreto do diálogo Sul-Sul, a aproximação da África do Sul à Rússia tem implicações importantes para o paradigma do poder emergente, juntamente com a sua relação com a China, em linha com o BRICS. A postura neutra da África do Sul em relação à invasão da Ucrânia pela Rússia afetou negativamente a sua postura pacífica e normativa. Isso é discutido no artigo como um indicador de como o idealismo e o pragmatismo se cruzam na política externa sul-africana. A análise da política externa é realizada através do uso de métodos de pesquisa qualitativos neste artigo. Como resultado, tentou-se compreender o paradigma do poder emergente para a África do Sul em linha com as abordagens de política externa dos governos de Mandela, Mbeki, Zuma e Ramaphosa desde 1994. É fundamental para a África do Sul, cujo estatuto de potência emergente está a ser questionado, equilibrar as relações que estabeleceu, em vez de se aliar a elas.

Palavras-chave

Potência emergente, África do Sul, BRICS, Equilíbrio, Aliança.

How to cite this article

Aydın, Hakan (2025). The Emerging Power Paradigm in South Africa's Relations with International Organisations. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 358-374. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.19>

Article submitted on 03rd June 2025 and accepted for publication on 15th September 2025.





THE EMERGING POWER PARADIGM IN SOUTH AFRICA'S RELATIONS WITH INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

HAKAN AYDIN

Introduction

The concept of power, which occupies a central position in international relations, has influenced the course of discussions within the discipline. Undoubtedly, the determinism of power in inter-state relations is essential in this regard. The ability of states with elements of power to shape international relations makes their actions in this direction a matter of debate. Power, which is reinforced by material and immaterial elements, is described with concepts such as superpower, global power, regional power, economic power, medium-sized power and rising power in line with the capacities of states. This discussion is important for understanding both the historical evolution and the dynamics of the international system. Debates surrounding the concept of rising powers are particularly prominent due to their connection with the emergence of new powers within the international system. Emerging power refers to a country that possesses certain tangible and intangible power elements and seeks to develop its sphere of influence in both near and far geographies.

South Africa is one of the continent's prominent countries due to its political, social, and economic significance. After the colonisation period, South Africa came to the forefront of the world agenda with the apartheid regime between 1948 and 1994. The apartheid regime was based on racial discrimination that led to the development of deep social problems. The end of the apartheid regime in 1994 marked the beginning of a new state-building process in both national and international political arenas. The foreign policy pursued after apartheid introduced a range of new policies and discourses. Domestic political changes in South Africa also have an impact on this issue. Especially, domestic economic problems are important variables for South Africa's international activity.

This article discusses the characterisation of South Africa as an emerging power after 1994. In this respect, two aspects stand out in South Africa's engagement in regional and global processes. While South Africa's regional objective is to engage with processes related specifically to the African continent, it is also evident that the country cooperates with emerging powers such as Russia, China, and Brazil within a global framework. It is observed that international organisations are used to institutionalise the cooperation framework. The development of cooperation is based on the development of economic relations and the conduct of political relations based on norms. South Africa's rising power metaphor in foreign policy can be analysed in line with the discourses and actions of the Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki, Jacob Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa periods. The Mandela



period represented a pivotal moment that enabled both the dismantling of the apartheid regime and the establishment of national conflict resolution mechanisms. Especially with the establishment of new relations with the United Nations (UN), foreign relations were established in a different way from the isolated apartheid regime. Mbeki, acting on the mission of African renaissance, pan-Africanism and Africa's influence on global platforms, has opened the rising power metaphor for South Africa to discussion. Although it may seem more passive compared to the Mbeki period, during the Zuma administration, South Africa actively pursued economic diplomacy and political cohesion through both intra- and extra-regional initiatives, culminating in its accession to BRIC. With the white paper declared in 2011, the foreign policy agenda of South Africa, which has a regional as well as a global mission, was laid out. In the post-2018 Ramaphosa period, it is seen that the southern dialogue continues, while relations with Russia and China are shaped by current developments. South Africa's neutrality in the war between Russia and Ukraine and its failure to condemn Russia's revisionist stance at the UN General Assembly expresses a pragmatist approach that is incompatible with the country's foreign policy, built on a historical framework.

This study will develop the analytical framework of the emerging power metaphor by exploring the variations in foreign policy strategies adopted by South African leaders and the relations of South Africa with international organisations. First of all, it is seen that social and economic problems may constitute an obstacle for South Africa to become an emerging power. The postapartheid transition to constitutional democracy and the development of a human rights-based approach symbolised an important transformation in the emerging power debate. It can be said that South Africa has been influenced by the countries it cooperates with around the concept of emerging power. At this point, South Africa needs to be able to practise balancing instead of bandwagoning. In addition, the processes aimed at developing South Africa's social and cultural relations around the emerging power discourse are also remarkable. When comparing the foreign policies of various leaders, it can be inferred that South Africa has moved away from its emerging power status. Ultimately, South Africa's emerging power status, which can be considered as a medium-sized power, will change in line with its continental activity and its relations with extra-regional countries.

An Overview of Society, Politics and Economy in South Africa

South Africa's role in Africa's colonial history is distinct from that of other countries on the continent. After 1948, the establishment of the apartheid regime based on racial discrimination by the whites who settled in South Africa before the 19th century has caused deep wounds in South Africa's history in many ways. The social segregation built by the apartheid regime with the laws was tried to be repaired with the collapse of the regime after 1994. Firstly, with the Population Registration Act, people in South Africa were registered as white, coloured and indigenous. The Group Areas Act led to the establishment of different living areas in the country, such as white, coloured and indigenous areas. The 1951 Bantu Authorities Act established independent areas for blacks to live in, while the 1953 Separate Amenities Act divided public spaces between whites and blacks. The 1960 Unlawful Organisations Act could declare parties to be unlawful in order to protect public safety and public order. This meant the restriction of



blacks' activities in the field of politics. The apartheid regime was defended on religious grounds by the Dutch Reformed Church. It is seen that the interpretations of the Bible are distorted to legitimise the apartheid regime built on racial discrimination. Apartheid period Prime Minister D.F. Malan's African charter, in which he argued that the continent could only develop under the guidance of whites, illustrates the mental codes of the regime (Barber, 1973: 100-103).

Between 1948 and 1994, there were also protests against the policies of the apartheid regime. Firstly, apartheid was classified as a crime against humanity by the UN General Assembly (Guelke, 2005: 1). In 1959, after blacks organised a protest march to criticise congressional passage laws, the police used armed force, and many people lost their lives. After the massacre, the African National Congress (ANC) was banned, and the opponents of the regime started an armed struggle. The apartheid regime's politics through the National Party were one-sided and far from inclusive until 1994. A system in which only whites can vote and become parliamentarians has emerged, with the domination of the minority over the majority. With the establishment of the ANC, which defended the rights of black people, social struggle started in this field. The decline of the apartheid regime in 1994 ushered in a bottom-up nation-building process, marked by significant constitutional reforms.

As of 2024, South Africa has a population of over 60 million and a gross domestic product of approximately \$400 billion. In 1994, South Africa's largest imports were from Germany and the United Kingdom, with the United States of America leading in exports. However, China is currently the leading destination for South Africa's exports (Vickers, 2012: 119-120). Apart from China, South Africa's trade with Russia, India and Brazil is also intensified. China, Russia, India and Brazil account for 17% of exports and 29% of imports. Moreover, South Africa's exports to its neighbours on the continent constitute an important part of its total exports. Since stability on the continent also has a meaning in terms of economic processes, South Africa's security concerns are shaped along this axis. In South Africa, economic problems such as inequality, poverty and unemployment come to the fore. In this respect, assessments based on the GINI coefficient of 0.67 indicate that income inequality is high in South Africa (Valodia, 2023). In this respect, the high unemployment rate, exceeding 30%, continues to exacerbate South Africa's economic challenges.

Since the end of the apartheid regime, the ANC has dominated South African politics. Over 30 years, national and international politics have been shaped by the governments of Mandela, Mbeki, Zuma and Ramaphosa. In the 2024 general elections, the ANC's decline in the vote and the fact that it had to form a coalition show the dissatisfaction with government policies at the grassroots level. The fact that 16 million out of 28 million voters cast their votes shows that the voter turnout in the elections was low, while the ANC's voting rates have declined significantly in the last two general elections.

Foreign Relations of South Africa

Foreign relations of South Africa, both regionally and globally, have diversified in accordance with the policies of postapartheid governments and their leaders. During the apartheid period between 1948 and 1994, foreign relations emerged under the influence



of discriminatory practices on a community basis. Following the collapse of the apartheid regime, a new bureaucracy was established within the Department of Foreign Affairs, reflecting the shift in South Africa's domestic political landscape (Özkan, 2025: 113). The transformation of international systemic conditions after 1994 has also contributed to this situation. National interest is shaped by the leader's foreign policy vision, public expectations, and the structure of the international system. For South Africa, the foreign policy vision of the leaders and the structure of the international system have had a significant impact on the shaping of foreign policy. Foreign policy behaviour is formed by political, military, economic and cultural instruments in line with certain objectives. Moreover, the actions of regional middle powers are influenced primarily by internal political factors (Westhuizen, 1998: 435). In South Africa's case, its foreign policy remains largely shaped by ongoing domestic political and socioeconomic issues. Rising middle powers are typically distinguished by foreign policy orientations that are ideologically informed and closely aligned with the agendas of strong ruling parties at the domestic level. In the South African context, the ANC holds significant control over foreign policy, influencing it both in practical terms and through its ideological stance (Black and Hornsby, 2016: 157-158). Emerging middle powers are generally characterised by a dominant ruling party at the national level, with a foreign policy that reflects the party's ideological outlook on international affairs (Spies, 2010).

The United Nations Security Council resolution of 1950 recognised apartheid policies as a form of racial discrimination. The UN's attitude towards South Africa hardened after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960. The UN called on states to impose an arms embargo on South Africa in 1963, and apartheid practices were recognised as crimes against humanity in 1973. South Africa's participation in the work of the UN General Assembly was suspended in 1974. The apartheid regime began to adopt an outward-looking approach (Goldenhuys, 1984). South Africa has endeavoured to build a network of economic and social relations on a southern regional basis (Davies and O'Meara, 1985: 184). In this period, South Africa prioritised relations with the Global South over broader continental engagement. South Africa's invasion of Namibia led to isolation and sanctions in the 1980s. In fact, the end of colonialism in Africa and the independence of the countries left the South African administration without support.

Especially during the apartheid period, the unfavourable course of relations at both regional and global levels emphasised actions aimed at repairing relations. In this respect, foreign policy is linked to domestic politics. Domestic political concerns limited foreign policy during apartheid. The primary goal of maintaining the apartheid regime, along with the failure to construct an inclusive national narrative, was a key factor in establishing a positive framework for foreign relations. When the new postapartheid administration was designing foreign policy, South Africa's future was linked to the African continent. In this direction, the international public opinion has also come to expect from South Africa. Post apartheid South Africa has moved away from an aggressive and confrontational foreign policy approach (Landsberg, 2009). After 1994, South Africa rejoined the UN and became a member of both the African Union and the Southern African Development Community. In line with its political and economic development objectives, South Africa has pursued an integration policy with international organisations. In this framework, she has been involved in the Asia-Africa Strategic Partnership and the Non-Aligned Movement initiatives. Since the end of apartheid, South



African foreign policy can be analysed in four different periods under the Mandela, Mbeki, Zuma and Ramaphosa governments.

Mandela Period (1994-1999)

In the post apartheid era during Mandela's leadership, South Africa transitioned from its long-standing status as a pariah state to being perceived as a key advocate and catalyst for the advancement of the African continent (Klingebiel, 2017). Therefore, the Mandela period was shaped around transformation and consolidation as it was postapartheid for South Africa. With the legal amendments, the state-building process was initiated through the operation of the conflict resolution mechanism in the social framework. In general, South Africa's foreign policy is founded on key principles such as the primacy of human rights in international relations, the promotion of democracy, adherence to international law, an Africa-focused perspective, and the advancement of regional economic development (Mandela, 1993). The first objective of the Mandela administration was to increase South Africa's engagement across the continent. In 1985, South Africa had 25 embassies across the continent, increasing to 43 in 1995. In Mandela's rhetoric, South Africa could not escape its African destiny, thereby forging a strong connection with the continent (Mandela, 1993: 89-90). The African agenda discourse, which emphasised that there can be no peace without development and no development without peace, was grounded in the Mandela government's goal of regional integration. During the Mandela period, South African foreign policy was overshadowed by his personality. The image of South Africa was equated with Mandela's image and profile.

Under Mandela, South Africa faced a challenging economic situation, with a compelling economic case for internal consolidation that had the capacity to affect its external relations. In this context, income inequality was severe, with the wealthy white minority favoured over the impoverished black majority, and unemployment remained persistently high (Alden and Pere, 2004: 287). Apart from the fact that economic reforms were based on this issue, it was emphasised that development could only be achieved through regional and international economic cooperation (Mandela, 1993: 86-87). There is no doubt that the primary objective of Mandela was to break the international isolation of South Africa. For this purpose, participation in international organisations was targeted. Additionally, South Africa's Africa-wide conflict resolution efforts have helped shape its foreign policy mission. Efforts to achieve a ceasefire between Congolese rebels were the result of a conflict resolution approach in 1997. South Africa's foreign policy during the Mandela period saw limited success in addressing the challenges related to Angola, Swaziland, and Nigeria (Özkan, 2025: 117). South Africa's regional policies during this period were based on preventive diplomacy, peacebuilding and humanitarian assistance (Westhuizen, 1998: 437). Furthermore, South Africa would recognise the People's Republic of China in 1996. Relations with Taiwan, which the apartheid regime had established, were severed in 1997. Human rights violations by the Chinese regime have adversely affected South Africa's international image (Wyk, 2012: 277). In April 2000, when Chinese President Jiang visited South Africa, relations were shaped on the basis of commercial interests. Apart from regional organisations, developing relations with other organisations at the global level is the result of the discourse of being strong.



South African foreign policy was characterised by a comprehensive orientation and strategic purpose in the 1994-1999 period. In 1999, under Mbeki's administration, this situation became different (Özkan, 2025: 106).

Mbeki Period (1999-2008)

The Mbeki period in South African foreign policy is characterised by the institutionalisation of foreign policy processes and a strong commitment to multilateralism. Firstly, after Mbeki became President in 1999, South Africa's approach to foreign relations has been multilateralism. On the other hand, Mbeki's concept of African Renaissance expresses a vision of ideological, political and social transformation of Africa. Through this approach, Mbeki emphasised the need for Africans to liberate themselves from the legacy of colonialism, aligning with an anti-imperialist paradigm and advocating strongly for the continent's development. The African Renaissance has been shaped by the preservation of cultural traditions, democracy and human rights, and the advancement of international cooperation. The African renaissance offers a powerful vision for a just and equitable world order. The aim of the African renaissance is to revitalise African civilisation and overcome the negative effects of colonialism (Bongmba, 2004: 309). The discourse of African renaissance emphasises assuming responsibility for the transformation of the continent. This has established the economic and social development agenda for South Africa. South Africa's economically driven foreign policy is rooted in normative values and shaped by the narrative of the African Renaissance (Alden and Pere, 2004: 287). However, the idea of an African renaissance has not been internalised across Africa. In other words, the fact that the African renaissance remained at the rhetorical level posed a problem in the production of policies.

During Mbeki's period, with the discourse of 'African solutions to Africa's problems', the importance of the activities of the AU on the continent's problems was emphasised. Moreover, in the formation of the AU, Mbeki played a strategic role in securing the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Bischoff, 2003: 192). On the other hand, with the G20 membership, the goal of improving global cooperation has emerged. Between 1994 and 2008, South Africa can be considered as a pragmatic, reformist emerging medium-sized power. The Mbeki period can be seen as a process of building for the development of South Africa's empowerment. The Mbeki government has encouraged strategic partnerships with countries in the region. While the Mandela period focused primarily on peacemaking and negotiations, the Mbeki period emphasised the preservation of peace and aimed to expand South Africa's sphere of influence across the continent.

Zuma Period (2009-2018)

After Mbeki, the Zuma administration placed greater emphasis on economic relations in its foreign policy. For this reason, it can be argued that South Africa's foreign policy did not undergo a radical shift during the Zuma period, although its economic dimension became more pronounced. This has meant creating new avenues in foreign policy. South Africa recognises the interdependence of states and encourages cooperation rather than competition and cooperation rather than conflict in foreign policy (White Paper, 2011:



10). Since 1994, South Africa's foreign policy has been guided by constitutional principles that prioritise the African continent and affirm a commitment to South-South cooperation, seek to consolidate relations with Northern countries, and aim to strengthen bilateral social, political, and economic ties (White Paper, 2011: 6). It is emphasised that Zuma's term was passive except for participation in BRIC (Cilliers, 2018). While Mbeki strategically sought multilateral engagement both internationally and at the African level, Zuma's influence was limited to South Africa's BRIC membership (Cilliers, 2018). This was considered an important achievement. South Africa's characteristic foreign policy of building bridges with developing and emerging countries, which developed under Mandela and Mbeki, has led to a deepening alliance with China and Russia under Zuma. South Africa's ability to balance its relations with China and Russia will also be linked to its rising power status. However, South Africa's tendency toward bandwagoning has undermined its credibility in the discourse surrounding emerging powers.

Ramaphosa Period (2018 onwards)

In the post-2018 Ramaphosa period, South Africa's foreign policy in the areas of economic development, African integration and expanding the framework of cooperation with international organisations has traces of the previous periods. Africa occupies a central position in South Africa's international cooperation policy. Especially, deeper integration increased trade across the continent (Cilliers, 2018). It is also argued that South Africa's declining multilateralism limits its ability to translate its power capacity into influence (Cilliers, 2018). South Africa's foreign policy has entered a period of pragmatism. In this context, more intensive relations were established with China and Russia. On 2 March 2022, South Africa abstained from the United Nations General Assembly vote condemning Russia, a fellow BRICS member, for its invasion of Ukraine. (Ishmael, 2023). South Africa's pro-Russian stance in the war between Russia and Ukraine has negatively affected its normative stance. This situation points to a conflict between national interests and normativism. South Africa's divergent policies when interests conflicted with ideals sparked controversy. However, South Africa's opposition to Israel's actions in Palestine, along with its filing of a genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice, reflects its commitment to a human rights-based foreign policy. South Africa's political and trade relations with Western countries, particularly the United States, have declined, whereas its ties with China have strengthened in these domains. South Africa's partnership with China is based on South-South cooperation on the axis of similar interests and the AU's Agenda 2063. It is seen that the 2063 Africa agenda, which emerged as a strategic plan, has turned into an inclusive road map.

South Africa's Relations with International Organisations: General Framework

South Africa's relations with international organisations can be analysed within the context of debates on emerging powers. Undoubtedly, South Africa's foreign policy and its engagement with international organisations offer a foundation for assessing its status as an emerging power. In this respect, South Africa's relations at the regional and



continental levels, as well as its engagement with global organisations, can be examined. Throughout its historical trajectory, South Africa's interaction with organisations such as the UN, AU, BRICS and G20 has taken diverse forms and reflected varying strategic priorities. South Africa's performance, initiatives, and influence within each organisation can be evaluated in a more systematic manner. However, this study will focus on an assessment based on the key points.

The concept of a middle power refers to a country whose leadership recognises that it cannot act effectively on its own, but believes it can have meaningful influence on the international system by working through global institutions (Keohane, 1969: 296). In this context, South African governments prefer to utilise multilateral forums and organisations rather than bilateral diplomacy (Schoeman, 2000: 50). Essentially, the aim of multilateral diplomacy is to reinforce a rules-based international system that reduces the chances of unilateral actions by major powers. South Africa's involvement with international organisations can be examined through the framework of four core strategies typically utilised by emerging middle powers: participating in policy-making within global governance institutions, seeking opportunities through bilateral relations and trade agreements, engaging in regional organising, and promoting regional mobilisation through economic integration (Yanacopulos, 2014: 206).

Particularly, the United Nations holds a prominent place in the foreign policy of South Africa. South Africa's relationship with the United Nations dates back to its role as a founding member in 1945. However, during the apartheid period, it was suspended and distanced from active participation in the organisation. The international response to the apartheid regime's acts of violence, which began with their condemnation in 1960, ultimately led to the suspension of South Africa's participation in the United Nations General Assembly in 1974. Following the collapse of the apartheid regime in 1994, South Africa began to participate actively in the United Nations. Furthermore, the key themes guiding South Africa's voting behaviour at the United Nations include the promotion of human rights and democracy, support for disarmament and non-proliferation, the advancement of African interests and the African Agenda, advocacy for United Nations reform, and the pursuit of fair and inclusive global governance (Graham, 2013). From 1994 to 2014, South Africa consistently supported thematic human rights resolutions at the United Nations, advocating for the protection of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, along with the promotion of democracy (Graham, 2016: 36). The emphasis on democracy, peace, prosperity, commitment to international law, and human rights during Nelson Mandela's presidency (1994-1999) laid the foundation for South Africa's relations with the United Nations. In addition, South Africa's accession to key UN conventions reflected the vision of a democratic nation actively engaging with the global community. Mbeki's period was characterised by a blend of idealism and a pursuit of a leadership role for South Africa on the international stage. The post-Mbeki period largely continued many of his policies, gradually shifting towards a discourse of national strategic interest. In contrast, the Zuma presidency adopted a more pragmatic approach to foreign policy (Yanacopulos, 2014: 210). During Jacob Zuma's presidency (2009-2018), South Africa pursued a vision of becoming a strong and prosperous nation by advocating for the United Nations as the most democratic body, promoting industrialisation, and investing in stronger infrastructure to drive sustainable economic growth.



The relationship between South Africa and the African Union strengthened significantly after the end of apartheid, especially through South Africa's role in the restructuring of the African Union in 2001. Over the past 25 years, South Africa has actively participated in the implementation of various policies and initiatives of the African Union. South Africa's engagement with the African Union reflects its aspiration to assume a leadership and representative role on behalf of the African continent. During Thabo Mbeki's presidency, the idea of the African Renaissance significantly influenced and helped shape the agenda of the African Union through South Africa's leadership. The leadership periods of Jacob Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa reflect differing approaches and dynamics in the evolution of South Africa's relations with the African Union. During Zuma's presidency, South Africa adopted a political approach that prioritised domestic issues, resulting in a relatively passive stance in its foreign policy towards the African continent. However, under Cyril Ramaphosa, South Africa adopted a more active and engaged approach towards the African continent. During this period, South Africa's leading role in holding the AU Chairmanship, mediating peace processes, and advancing initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Agreement are key indicators of its renewed engagement and leadership within the African Union.

South Africa's engagement with BRICS plays a crucial role in debates on emerging powers and the shifting dynamics of global governance. South Africa's accession to BRICS in 2010, alongside Brazil, Russia, India, and China, has provided the country with a strategic platform to diversify its global engagements and strengthen its position within the emerging multipolar world order. As of 2024, the inclusion of Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates has expanded BRICS into a ten-member structure, reflecting its growing geopolitical significance. Being a member of BRICS has enhanced South Africa's position and influence as a key emerging economy. The country views its membership as strategically important, particularly in addressing domestic economic challenges. BRICS serves as a potential source of foreign direct investment (FDI), offers access to diversified markets, and provides a platform that South Africa can leverage to strengthen its role and partnerships within the African Union (DTIC, 2023). In line with its BRICS membership, South Africa's efforts to increase its influence in multilateral decision-making processes and to safeguard its long-term interests by promoting global order and cooperation through multilateral institutions lie at the heart of debates surrounding its status as an emerging power (Black and Hornsby, 2016: 152-153). Furthermore, South Africa remains the sole representative of the African continent within the G20, underscoring its strategic importance in global economic governance. South Africa's membership in the G20 serves as a mechanism for ensuring the representation of the African continent in global economic platforms, thereby assigning South Africa a broader continental responsibility and strategic mission. South Africa's engagement with the G20 is interpreted as a reflection of its aspiration for regional leadership and as a means of consolidating its status and influence as an emerging power within the global order.

South Africa's foreign policy is primarily shaped by the pursuit of regional common interests and collective benefits (Klingebiel, 2017). As noted by Schoeman, South Africa's role and status within the region, and more generally across the African continent, remain subjects of ambiguity and lack a unified perspective (Schoeman, 2000: 56). South Africa's relations with international organisations underscore its commitment to



normative principles in global governance, while also revealing an underlying aspiration to enhance its international status and recognition.

South Africa: A Rising Power?

In general terms, the power capacity of a state consists of its economy, population, technology, military and international interactions. The concept of power can be differentiated in terms of the elements possessed. Hard power is built through military and economic capabilities; soft power capacity is built through culture, political values, education and social activities. While the possession of hard power elements is considered within the material framework, soft power is developed through intangible instruments of power, especially through influence and persuasion. Power categorisations in international relations are established on this axis. The dimensions of power can be classified as military, economic, cultural, diplomatic, geographical, demographic and natural resources. The power capacities of emerging powers in the international system and the way they influence relations are of great interest. Emerging power countries are expected to have most of these dimensions. In addition, the power indices developed in conjunction with these criteria make it possible to compare and rank states. Global power and soft power indices offer insights into the relative power positions of states (Dalio, 2024; Brand Finance, 2024).

As a result of changing international dynamics, emerging and medium-sized powers have gained influence after the Cold War. Emerging powers tend to be active in their geographical area; their behavioural pattern is more appeasing than reformist (Jordaan, 2003). Emerging powers aim for regional organisation through coalition building, development of bilateral relations and trade agreements (Hau et. al, 2012). The regional power discourse is also characterised by capacities, relationalities and approaches. While building capacity through both hard and soft power elements, a relational framework is created around economic, political and security issues. The approaches used in foreign policy shape this process. In line with the balancing, bandwagoning and coalition behaviours in foreign policy, if the emerging power engages in bandwagoning behaviour, it may negatively affect the process of increasing its power capacity.

Emerging and medium-sized powers have the function of influencing and directing other states on issues such as migration, environment, human rights and conflict resolution, which constitute the agenda of international relations. The powers are expected to be both willing and capable of assuming roles and responsibilities. Emerging powers must assess the evolving dynamics of global politics and leverage their comparative advantages to play a more influential role. The shift in the balance of power in the international system after the Cold War, along with the rapid narrowing of the capacity gap between developed countries and emerging powers, has created new opportunities for South Africa. According to Ray Dalio (2024: 100), South Africa ranks 23rd in the global power index. In this context, South Africa's main problems can be categorised under the headings of economy, education, innovation and technology, relative insignificance in global trade, corruption, lack of infrastructure, low investment, and a weak military. Particularly, economic dependence on foreign investments stands out in the case of South Africa. In this context, South Africa's relationship with China has also



manifested significantly in the commercial sphere. Additionally, political polarisation, corruption, and economic and social problems within the country increase the sovereignty risk. In the soft power index ranking conducted by Brand Finance (2024: 64-65), South Africa fell to 43rd place in 2024. A decline is also observed in the fields of education and science in this index.

South Africa's post-1994 efforts to assert itself as a regional power are closely linked to its broader state-building process. As an emerging power with a visionary new foreign policy and geopolitical discourse, South Africa has aimed to increase its influence both regionally and across the continent. South Africa has taken a leading role in implementing conflict resolution mechanisms at the continental level. In 1998, the government approved the white paper on South Africa's participation in international peace missions. In this context, South Africa has participated in peacekeeping operations and has become a regional actor in this regard (Muller, 1999). However, after that, the argument also surfaced that South Africa could be a good candidate for peacekeeping but lacked the administrative and practical capacity (Nhlapo, 1999: 118). Taking action on security issues also carries significance within the framework of aligning with the behaviour patterns of a regional power and an emerging power.

As emphasised in the South African National Planning Commission's 2011 "National Development Plan: Vision 2030", increased economic development will also strengthen Africa's influence in global processes. For this reason, it can be said that economic objectives have gained prominence in South Africa's foreign policy. South Africa's Vision 2025 outlines key objectives such as reducing unemployment, inequality, and poverty; promoting sustainable economic development; contributing to Africa's advancement; and enhancing its role as a successful and influential member of the international community (White Paper, 2011). Alongside its focus on development, South Africa aims to be effective in resolving conflicts on the continent. Moreover, the initiation of the G20 Africa Partnership led by South Africa is an important step. South Africa also assumed the G20 presidency in 2024.

Due to the nature of the power they possess, states have varying levels of influence on the global system (Keohane, 1969: 296). Great powers hold economic and political dominance over other countries. Middle-sized or emerging powers may not exert systemic influence on their own, but they can do so through international organisations (Keohane, 1969: 296). South Africa's status as an emerging power is inherently paradoxical. South Africa is the economic giant of the African continent, yet it remains a relatively minor player in the global economy (Kornegay, 2012: 203). It is inevitable that domestic economic problems in South Africa will affect its status as an emerging power. Although South Africa is considered a middle power, a significant portion of its population continues to live below the poverty line (Yanacopulos, 2014). When South Africa's status as an emerging power is questioned, there is a pressing need to strengthen inter-societal relations. At this point, public diplomacy practices can be utilised. Public diplomacy is essential for South Africa to effectively project its image, values, and culture at both domestic and international levels (White Paper, 2011: 36). South Africa's public diplomacy should be understood as the deliberate projection of its image, values, and culture both domestically and internationally. One of the challenges South Africa faces in becoming a soft power can be said to be xenophobia (Ogunnubi and Amao, 2016: 309).



Becoming an emerging power requires developing actions at both the regional and global levels. In doing so, efforts often focus on areas such as mediation and peacekeeping, while aiming to establish partnerships within a global framework. In the Russia-Ukraine war, South Africa did not condemn Russia's revisionist stance at the UN, whereas other emerging powers such as Brazil, Nigeria, and Indonesia did. South African President Ramaphosa stated that they would not adopt a hostile stance toward Russia. Viewed from this perspective, the trajectory of South Africa's foreign policy reflects a greater reliance on pragmatism and *realpolitik* than on normative values. It is evident that South Africa's foreign policy has diverged from the normative framework established in the postapartheid era and now embodies a more pragmatic and integrative orientation. The influence capacity of an emerging power can be measured by its ability to achieve outcomes in line with its political objectives. South Africa's position in this regard is subject to debate. In this context, South Africa's inability to ensure the effective functioning of the AU can be considered an indicator. The fundamental distinction between a middle power and an emerging power lies in the state's capacity to exert regional influence. Within this framework, it is essential for South Africa to closely monitor and actively engage with plans and programs aimed at strengthening its capacity for regional influence. Although South Africa stands out economically at the regional and continental levels in Africa, its global influence remains limited. South Africa's ability to maintain balanced bilateral relations, along with its engagement in international organisations, is a significant factor in assessing its status as an emerging power.

Conclusion

This article examines South Africa's foreign policy from a historical perspective through comparative analysis and evaluates its status as an emerging power. South Africa is one of the leading countries on the African continent. As one of the symbolic representations of Africa's colonial experience, South Africa occupies a central place in ongoing debates about the continent's postcolonial trajectory. The most fundamental debate in the discipline of international relations revolves around the concept of power. The way the concept of power gives meaning to states' positions in the international system shapes the nature of these debates. An emerging power reflects a transition from one category of power to another, or a trajectory of increasing power. While the concept of an emerging power can explain a regional power's transition toward becoming a global power, it also becomes a subject of debate when a middle power evolves into a regional power. An emerging power holds political and economic dominance within its own region. It is quite clear that assessing states within a single category of power is a challenging task. In other words, attention should also be drawn to the presence of subjective interpretations regarding the criteria that indicate whether a state qualifies as an emerging power. While the primary interest in South Africa's foreign policy is achieving socioeconomic development, it also emphasises a peaceful approach toward the international system. At this point, South Africa can be assessed as a regional, continental leader and a middle power. South Africa's emphasis on participating in integration initiatives both within and beyond the continent, along with its relations with international organisations, reflects outcomes indicative of its emerging power status. South Africa has advantages as a regional power, but internal issues such as high



unemployment and socio-political instability act as limiting factors. South Africa's foreign policy can be broadly divided into the pre-apartheid and postapartheid periods. In particular, the foreign policy choices of postapartheid governments have significantly shaped evaluations of South Africa as an emerging power. States that do not qualify as middle powers often lack the capacity to ensure their national security independently and therefore rely on alignment with other states or international organisations for support and protection. As an emerging power, South Africa demonstrates a defining characteristic of middle powers: an emphasis on multilateralism and cooperative engagement within international organisations. Emerging and middle powers prioritise balancing strategies while supporting international stability, aiming to preserve and enhance their global standing. These states place particular emphasis on the peaceful resolution of disputes and strict adherence to international law. South Africa's need for substantial capacity building as an emerging power, particularly by prioritising a balancing policy over alignment within its relations through BRICS, is a critical issue in debates surrounding emerging powers.

References

- Alden C., Pere, G. (2004). South Africa's Postapartheid Foreign Policy: From Reconciliation to Ambiguity?, *Review of African Political Economy*, 31(100), 283-297.
- Barber, J. (1973). *South Africa's Foreign Policy 1945-1970*. Oxford University Press.
- Bischoff, P.H. (2003). External and Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy Ambiguity: South African Foreign Policy and the Projection of Pluralist Middle Power, *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies*, 30(2), 183-201.
- Black, D. R., Hornsby, D. J. (2016). South Africa's Bilateral Relationships in The Evolving Foreign Policy of an Emerging Middle Power, *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 54(2), 151-160.
- Bongmba, E.K. (2004). Reflections on Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30(2), 291-316.
- Brand Finance. (2024). "Global Soft Power Index", <https://static.brandirectory.com/reports/brand-finance-soft-power-index-2024-digital.pdf>
- Cilliers, J. (14 May 2018). "New middle-power country partners for South Africa?", <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/new-middle-power-country-partners-for-south-africa>
- Dalio, R. (2024). The Great Power Index: 2024, How the Leading 24 Countries are Doing and Their Prospects for the Next 10 Years.
- Davies, R., O'Meara, D. (1985). Total Strategy in Southern Africa: An Analysis of South African Regional Policy Since 1978, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 11(2), 183-211.
- Department of Trade, Industry and Competition. (2023). BRICS Benefits, <https://www.thedtic.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/BRICS-Benefits-to-South-Africa.pdf>
- Geldenuys, D. (1984). *The Diplomacy of Isolation: South African Foreign Policy Making*, Macmillan South Africa.



Graham, S. E. (2013). South Africa's Voting Behaviour in the United Nations (1994-2008), Doctorate Thesis, University of Johannesburg.

Graham, S. E. (2016). Yea or Nay? Democratic South Africa's Voting Behaviour in an Intergovernmental Organisation, *The Journal of The Helen Suzman Foundation*, Issue 79, 35-41.

Guelke, A. (2005). *Rethinking the Rise and Fall of Apartheid, South Africa and World Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Hau, M.V., Scott J., Hulme, D. (2012). Beyond the BRICs: Alternative Strategies of Influence in the Global Politics of Development, *The European Journal of Development Research*, 24(2), 187-204.

Ishmael, L. (2023). "The New South in a Multipolar World Multi-Alignment or Fence Sitting?, Lessons from South Africa, India and Others", Policy Paper, Policy Centre for the New South.

Jordaan, E. (2003). The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers, *Politikon*, 30(2), 165-181.

Keohane, R.O. (1969). Lilliputians Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics, *International Organisation*, 23(2), 291-310.

Klingebiel, S. (2017). Transnational public goods provision: the increasing role of rising powers and the case of South Africa, *Third World Quarterly*, 39(1), 175-188.

Kornegay, F. (2012). South Africa and Emerging Powers, C. Landsberg and J.A.V. Wyk (Ed.), *South African Foreign Policy Review* (pp. 198-214), Africa Institute of South Africa.

Landsberg, C. (2009). "South Africa's 'African Agenda': Challenges of Policy and Implementation", Fifteen Year Review Project.

Mandela, N. (1993). South Africa's Future Foreign Policy, *Foreign Affairs*, 72(5), 86-97.

Muller, M. (1999). South African Diplomacy and Security Complex Theory, *The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs and Policy Studies*, 88(352), 585-620.

Nhlapo, W. (1999). South Africa and Peacekeeping: Looking to the Future, J. Cilliers and G. Mills (Ed.), *From Peacekeeping to Complex Emergencies: Peace Support Missions in Africa* (pp. 127-132), South African Institute of International Affairs.

Ogunnubi, O., Amao, O.B. (2016). South Africa's Emerging Soft Power Influence in Africa and Its Impending Limitations: Will the Giant Be Able to Weather the Storm?, *African Security*, 9(4), 299-319.

Özkan, M. (2025). *Batı Dışı Dünya*, Kadim Yayınları.

Schoeman, M. (2000). South Africa as an Emerging Middle Power, *African Security Review*, 9:3, 47-58.

Spies, Y.K. (2010). South Africa's Multilateral Challenges in a Polypolar World, *The International Spectator*, 45(4), 73-91.



Valodia, I. (15 September 2023). "South Africa can't crack the inequality curse. Why and what can be done?" <https://www.wits.ac.za/news/latest-news/opinion/2023/2023-09/south-africa-cant-crack-the-inequality-curse-why-and-what-can-be-done.html>

Vickers, B. (2012). "South African's Economic Diplomacy in a Changing Global Order", C. Landsberg and J.A.V. Wyk (Ed.), *South African Foreign Policy Review* (pp. 112-138), Africa Institute of South Africa.

Westhuizen, J.V.D. (1998). South Africa's Emergence as a Middle Power, *Third World Quarterly*, 19(3), 435-456.

White Paper. (2011). "South Africa's Foreign Policy, Building a Better World: The Diplomacy of Ubuntu", https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/foreignpolicy0.pdf

Wyk, J.A.V. (2012). Reflections on South Africa's postapartheid Foreign Policy and Preliminary Comments on Future Foreign Policy, C. Landsberg and J.A.V. Wyk (Ed.), *South African Foreign Policy Review* (pp. 274-290), Africa Institute of South Africa.

Yanacopulos, H. (2014). The Janus Faces of a Middle Power: South Africa's Emergence in International Development, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40(1), 203-216.

CIVILIZATIONAL STATES IN A CHANGING GLOBAL ORDER: INDIA'S EMERGING ROLE IN BRICS

SRESHTHA CHAKRABORTY

Sreshtha90@gmail.com

Assistant Professor, Bennett University (India). <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0912-1880>

Abstract

The concept of a non-Western civilisational state, which emphasises preserving and promoting a nation's unique cultural and civilisational heritage, challenges the universality of Western values and contributes to the broader discourse on unipolarity versus multipolarity. India's multifaceted identity, shaped by thousands of years of spiritual, philosophical, and political discourse, positions it as a pivotal actor in the emerging multipolar world order. Through its evolving multi-alignment policy, India maintains an interest-based approach with emerging and existing powers while asserting its civilisational ethos as a model of governance that blends democratic principles with traditional values. This paper also examines India's partnership with Russia and China within the Russia-India-China (RIC) grouping within the BRICS framework, where these states collectively aim to challenge Western ideological hegemony and reshape global governance to reflect a multipolar, civilisational plural world. The paper critiques Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilisations" theory and argues for a more dynamic understanding of civilisational identities, emphasising the interconnectedness of civilisations such as India, China, and Russia. In this context, the paper argues that BRICS emerges as a geopolitical and economic coalition, as well as a force for cultural and civilisational pluralism. The civilisational identities of India, China, and Russia provide a counterpoint to Western liberalism, advocating for a world order based on mutual respect, cultural continuity, and cooperation rather than ideological conflict.

Keywords

BRICS, Civilisational values, Non-Western IR, RIC.

Resumo

O conceito de um Estado civilizacional não ocidental, que enfatiza a preservação e a promoção do património cultural e civilizacional único de uma nação, desafia a universalidade dos valores ocidentais e contribui para o discurso mais amplo sobre unipolaridade versus multipolaridade. A identidade multifacetada da Índia, moldada por milhares de anos de discurso espiritual, filosófico e político, posiciona-a como um ator fundamental na ordem mundial multipolar emergente. Através da sua política de alinhamento múltiplo em evolução, a Índia mantém uma abordagem baseada em interesses com potências emergentes e existentes, ao mesmo tempo que afirma o seu ethos civilizacional como um modelo de governação que combina princípios democráticos com valores tradicionais. Este artigo também examina a parceria da Índia com a Rússia e a China no âmbito do agrupamento Rússia-Índia-China (RIC) dentro da estrutura do BRICS, onde esses Estados visam



coletivamente desafiar a hegemonia ideológica ocidental e remodelar a governança global para refletir um mundo multipolar e civilizacionalmente plural. O artigo critica a teoria do “choque de civilizações” de Samuel Huntington e defende uma compreensão mais dinâmica das identidades civilizacionais, enfatizando a interconectividade de civilizações como a Índia, a China e a Rússia. Neste contexto, o artigo argumenta que o BRICS surge como uma coligação geopolítica e económica, bem como uma força para o pluralismo cultural e civilizacional. As identidades civilizacionais da Índia, China e Rússia fornecem um contraponto ao liberalismo ocidental, defendendo uma ordem mundial baseada no respeito mútuo, na continuidade cultural e na cooperação, em vez do conflito ideológico.

Palavras-chave

BRICS, valores civilizacionais, RI não ocidental, RIC.

How to cite this article

Chakraborty, Sreshtha (2025). Civilizational States in a Changing Global Order: India's Emerging Role in BRICS. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 375-388. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.20>

Article submitted on 25th May 2025 and accepted for publication on 18th September 2025.





CIVILIZATIONAL STATES IN A CHANGING GLOBAL ORDER: INDIA'S EMERGING ROLE IN BRICS

SRESHTHA CHAKRABORTY

Introduction

The traditional perspective of International Relations (IR) posits that it is a discipline rooted in Western philosophical thought, with its issues and solutions predominantly shaped by Western viewpoints. Academic comprehension of international politics is primarily considered to originate from Western scholarship and institutions, with theories such as realism and liberalism being mainly influenced by Western philosophers, including Hobbes, Locke, and Kant. These theories have become the prevailing paradigms in International Relations (IR) (Rumelili, 2014). Nevertheless, revisionist scholars challenge this perspective, contending that the narrative of the Treaty of Westphalia is a constructed history devised to provide a foundation for traditional or realist theories (Acharya & Buzan, 2007). There is little doubt that the discipline of International Relations (IR) and world politics are transitioning from established global powers to emerging ones. The frameworks led by Western nations that have shaped international governance since the end of World War II are undergoing increasing transformation. As new powers, notably the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China), enhance their influence on the international stage, there is a growing call to reevaluate and recalibrate IR theories and practices to comprehend the evolving dynamics of global politics better. Following the end of the Cold War, the West's triumph fostered the belief that its core values —such as liberal democracy, free markets, and human rights —were universal principles destined to sustain long-term global dominance.

This research is qualitative and interpretive, grounded in constructivist and postcolonial understandings of International Relations (IR), with a focus on discourse analysis. The research is based on various primary and secondary sources. It uses official government communications, policy texts, and academic literature. The research critically analyses how India frames its place in the BRICS system using the discourse of civilisational identity. This study adds to de-centring Western-oriented IR paradigms by highlighting India's role as an emerging power and civilisational state, articulating an alternative vision for global governance based on cultural pluralism and spiritual heritage. It constructs BRICS as a possible platform for civilisational discussion and South-South cooperation. However, the research possesses several shortcomings. The findings may not be generalised across all BRICS members, as they exhibit distinct historical trajectories and national identities. Due to the dynamic nature of world politics, the research limits its consideration of the influence of recent geopolitical events, such as the



Russia-Ukraine conflict or shifting Sino-Indian realities, on the future of BRICS. Despite these limitations, the study makes a significant contribution to understanding India's evolving foreign policy and its ambitions in an increasingly complex, multipolar, and culturally diverse world order.

Evolving Non-Western International Relations

There is nothing new about scholars of international relations criticising Western centrism in the field of IR theory; it is a theme that keeps resurfacing. Dependency School and World Systems theorists have questioned the Western-centric approach to international relations since the 1960s and 1970s, particularly during decolonisation (Wallerstein, 2004). The development of non-Western international relations theories within peripheral states has recently gained prominence. The most significant and striking factor in the transformation of the world is that non-Western civilisational states are playing an increasingly important role (Acharya & Buzan, 2010). What we mean by this concept is that we think of states that weigh their legitimacy not on a nation but on their civilisational heritage. In the West, the primary condition for a state's legitimacy is its democratic functioning. Nevertheless, in a civilisational state, the presence or absence of democracy holds minimal significance. Henry Kissinger (2014) expressed concern that competing conceptions of civilisation could lead to conflicts that could be even more dangerous than the conventional conflicts between states. He contended that the fundamental conflict in the modern world is not merely a struggle for political power or economic influence; instead, it is a struggle for deeply ingrained cultural and civilisational values. As a result, states often use historical and cultural narratives to legitimise their power, making the significance of culture in this context frequently surpass that of political calculations. This concept is presented in the "civilisational state," which, according to the assertions of some Asian academics, is defined not only by political authority but also by an extraordinary moral authority that distinguishes it from the Western state model (Mahbubani, 2023). Huntington opines that the major civilisations of the world, Western, Islamic, Confucian, and Hindu civilisations, among others, will be the dominant sources of conflict in the post-Cold War period. In his argument, Huntington asserts that civilisational identity, based on religion, culture and historical experience, is an enduring force that influences global politics. This argument was reawakened in "The Great Convergence," as referred to by Mahbubani (2013), who claims that the world is currently shifting from a Western-dominated international order to a multipolar world, where, especially in Asia, non-Western civilisations assert their values and models of governance. The ideological hegemony of the West, including liberal democracy, is now increasingly challenged by civilisations with different historical narratives, values, and ways to govern. Non-Western powers, such as China, India, and Russia, are asserting their civilisational identities in an increasingly purposeful manner and promoting alternative governance approaches based on historical legitimacy, cultural continuity, and moral authority within institutions. These nation-states no longer assert their political influence alone; they also offer political legitimacy based on their civilisational identity.

Mahbubani (2013) argues that the world is transitioning from an international order dominated by the Western world to a more multipolar world in which non-Western civilisations, particularly those in Asia, assert their values and models of governance.



This perpetually evolving geopolitical dynamic highlights the escalating tension that manifests on the international stage between a universalism driven by the West and the resurgence of distinct civilisational values, which compete or cooperate. Huntington has encountered considerable criticism, predominantly for his reductionist and essentialist approach to civilisational identities, with numerous critics concentrating on deconstructing the debates (Adib-Moghaddam, 2010). Nevertheless, one of the most concerning aspects of his theory is his categorisation of civilisations such as Chinese, Hindu, and Eastern as discrete, separate entities. This perspective fails to recognise these civilisations' historical and contemporary interconnectedness and affinities. In contrast to Huntington's reductionist framework, International Relations (IR) scholarship has largely overlooked the long-standing and enriching interactions between Chinese and Indian civilisations. This paper critiques the assumptions underlying civilisational identities defined solely by cultural, religious, or geographical distinctions and highlights their limitations. It examines the discourse surrounding civilisations in International Relations (IR) and discusses the concept of "civilisation-states" within the context of the BRICS. Specifically, it explores the critical components of civilisational overlaps and exchanges between these countries and how both invoke their "civilisation-state" identities in contemporary bilateral relations.

Civilisations are dynamic entities that evolve through their internal diversity and interactions with one another (Cox, 2002). Unlike the rigid borders of nation-states, civilisations surpass national limits and challenge traditional ideas of territoriality. Historical inter-civilisational exchanges have been crucial; for example, Europe's journey towards modernity was significantly shaped by exchanges with China, India, and the Islamic world (Arnason, 2006). These interactions take on political importance when civilisations are used to construct identities. Civilisational identity is vital in defining a community's boundaries by distinguishing between "self" and "other." How individuals, states, and regions position themselves globally and assess others is essential. In China and India, both at the institutional and societal levels, the narratives of their rich civilisational histories have been utilised to guide their transformations from less prosperous eras to potentially brighter futures. The histories of these states extend beyond museums, artefacts, or archaeological finds; their civilisational legacies are vibrant narratives that continue to influence their definitions of national excellence. This perception of their civilisational heritage is meaningful in enhancing national identities, shaping their ambitions, and preserving national interests. However, asserting such an identity is insufficient. For civilisational identity to possess social and political significance, other international actors must recognise it as legitimate.

It is China and India who are in constant tussle to prove their assertion as the custodians of their ancient civilisations. These assertions are not universally recognised but are in the process of receiving acknowledgement from and within the international order. Such recognitions not only influence both domestic and international relations but also indicate political relevance within the BRICS framework. It asserts that it comprises emerging powers united not only by political or economic aims but also by shared cultural and civilisational values. These values directly challenge Western dominance. The political significance of civilisational heritage, rather than being a matter of history, continues to play a vital role in shaping contemporary geopolitical discourse. Sharing a sense of cultural heritage may facilitate the resolution of past disputes, instead of being



entrenched in a perpetual cycle of inevitable conflict over cultural differences, as Huntington posits, the clash of civilisations. These two civilisations demonstrate that a common history and culture can foster coexistence and enhance their present relations. Recognising their civilisational inheritance is essential for promoting diplomatic engagement and cooperation.

Viswa-Guru: India's claims to civilisational exceptionalism

India's claims of civilisational exceptionalism in the international system have deep historical origins. In the fight against colonialism in the years before independence in 1947, Indian leaders and thinkers often espoused the idea that India's moral and spiritual heritage was a counterpoint to Western preoccupation with material advancement and superiority of Eastern spirituality vis-à-vis Western materialism, thus situating India in a singular position to offer moral leadership to world society (Estrada, 2023). This civilisational identity became central to India's conception of itself and worldview, especially as it struggled to establish an alternative world order based on moral and religious values (Volodin, 2020). It later helped India secure its post-independence position as a strict defender of the Global South. Civilisational entitlement was used to justify India's assertion to act on behalf of humanity as a nation-state and moral model. Post-independence, the civilisational narrative further changed. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, espoused a secular and plural vision of Indian civilisation based on diversity and peaceful coexistence. Influenced by a liberal intellectual tradition, Nehru thought of Indian civilisation as open-ended and internally diverse, shaping his approach towards foreign policy. His emphasis on non-alignment and peaceful coexistence of nations was a direct carryover of this civilisational outlook (Estrada, 2023). India's right-wing government offered a more exclusivist view, asserting that Hinduism fundamentally and solely defines Indian civilisation. This definition repeatedly recurred within India's foreign policy framework, particularly when the right-wing party assumed power. With Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), civilisational discourse in Indian politics has taken a more essentialist and assertive turn since the party came to power in 2014 (Srivastava, 2023). The emphasis on Hinduism today is accompanied by greater assertiveness and an integral understanding of India's role in the world, linked to its Hindu civilisational identity. While a part of the state is involved in the globalisation process, a civilisational identity has emerged, both as a reaction to it and as a component of the process itself. Globalisation claims to recognise and value the distinctions and plurality of identities within and between states across our new global contexts. While there is an ongoing debate as to whether using "civilisation" is an adequate analytical category, it is, or has become, clear that the frequent references made to it in cultural and political contexts indicate its presumed utility after a long time. Yeşiltaş (2014) believes that civilisation is an institution and a participant in international politics. Civilisations are cultural constructs based on actual or perceived social relationships. In this Indian context, civilisational thinking is revitalised by three broad changes to the global political order and discourse. Since its inception, the liberal international order has been overwhelmingly shaped by Western powers. However, it has faced significant challenges, particularly following the 2008 global financial crisis, which revealed deep-seated flaws in neoliberal economic models. Europe has grappled with quasi-



constitutional crises, including the stalled EU constitution, the Eurozone debt crisis, setbacks in foreign policy in the Middle East (the Arab Spring) and Ukraine, migration issues, and the Brexit referendum. These developments have highlighted a substantial limitation in liberal democratic values and the EU's soft power (Öniş & Kutlay, 2019). Furthermore, the West has lost its monopoly over globalisation, with alternative development models and value systems emerging. This crisis of the international neoliberal order has overlapped with a global upsurge in identity politics and populism, which have emerged from both left and right movements, mobilised against international governance and cosmopolitan elites, stressing sovereignty and national culture (Kriesi et al., 2008). It emerges simultaneously with the rise of Asian powers, namely China and India, breaking the assumed link between modernisation and Westernisation, as they prefer to embody political and economic paths that are foreign to liberal democratic norms (Acharya, 2020).

Technological advancements have disrupted the global information landscape, creating competing narratives amplified by digital platforms and state media. In this context, civilisational identities are making a comeback and becoming politicised. In the newly emerging multipolar world, regional powers such as Russia, China, India, Turkey, and Iran are adopting civilisational discourses to validate their global roles and expand their influence. These developments have brought civilisations back into the forefront of international politics, transforming them from mere cultural categories into strategic narratives.

A foundational part of Modi's foreign policy narrative is the assertion that India possesses a unique and valuable worldview, predicated on unity and universalism —a perspective that Prime Minister Modi frequently expresses through the phrase "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (Hall, 2019). This concept has been a prominent feature of Modi's speeches on global platforms. As recently as 2020, PM Modi's comments to the 75th United Nations General Assembly included the assertion that India has embraced the ideals of the UN since time immemorial because our cultural philosophy has long viewed the world as one family. In this instance, he highlighted India's long-standing commitment to peacekeeping and the country's desire for an increased role in the UN. Modi's references to 'One World, One Family' have appeared in other contexts, with policy circles and foreign policy elites in India discussing both ideas on multiple occasions. However, as Hansen (2013) notes, even discourses that claim universalism are based on implicit distinctions. For example, 'universal human rights' create the distinction between those who support and oppose such rights. The same logic applies when applied to civilisational values. Although Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam suggests a global collective identity, the contemporary nature of Foreign policy immediately localises that notion within Indian culture by stating it is an element of "our culture, character and thinking." It creates a binary situation between India, which holds these values, and others who do not hold or reject these values. This inclination to culturally ground universal values appears in various contexts. At the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26), Modi opened his speech with a Sanskrit mantra promoting collective unity in thought and action. He highlighted that his inspirations derive from a cultural heritage that advocates for "Happiness for All" (Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah). The seemingly universal goal is again portrayed as an Indian addition to the global discussion.



Understanding the ideological stakes of Modi's universalism requires an appreciation of the intertextual and philosophical elements in his rhetoric. It must also be noted that while these aspects of Modi's rhetoric are not always meticulously referenced, they are an essential part and, again, a normative, robust appropriation of the contemporary neo-Vedanta thought system. Modi's rhetorical genres and representations assimilate well as discursive formations, which draw heavily on the neo-Vedanta, as presented by nineteenth-century figures such as Swami Vivekananda. In this, not only were Vedic texts favourably interpreted, but they were also situated as foundation texts of Hinduism and, hence, the core of the spiritual essence of Indian civilisation. This perspective is reflected in contemporary nationalism. Advaita Vedanta, a Hindu philosophical system, was founded in the 8th century CE and is associated with the philosopher Shankara. Advaita Vedanta is the singular or non-dualistic conceptualisation of the universe; however, in the nineteenth century, thinkers like Vivekananda and Aurobindo developed a national interest and interpreted Advaita Vedanta, albeit vaguely, into a nationalist perspective with a transcendental or metaphysical basis for those constructs in India.

India-China Civilisational Claims: Cooperation and Contestation

India and China are the two leading Asian powers that express their roles in the world through the narrative of the "civilisational state." Both claim legitimacy not just from economic growth and geopolitical stronghold, but also by referencing their long civilisational histories. This parallel positioning creates a dual dynamic of cooperation and conflict that increasingly shapes the conversation about world order.

China and India both base their foreign policies on civilisational narratives, but they do so in very different ways. China relies on Confucian ideals of harmony, order, and hierarchy. It presents itself as a guardian of ancient wisdom while showcasing its technological and developmental strengths. India, on the other hand, emphasises pluralism, democracy, and spirituality. India views itself as a civilisational actor that can provide moral and philosophical guidance while remaining open to diverse identities and democratic practices. Their civilisational narratives create openings for cooperation. Both countries reject the universality of Western liberal values, advocate for cultural pluralism, and support a multipolar world. The relationship between India and China is not merely a "clash of civilisations" but a competition over who truly represents Asia's civilisational heritage. How these narratives develop, whether they promote dialogue within the BRICS or lead to rivalry, will have a significant impact on regional and global governance. These approaches come together most clearly in multilateral forums like BRICS. Both countries use this platform to assert their civilisational identity and challenge Western universalism. However, their strategies differ. China prefers centralised, state-led development. India supports inclusivity and pluralistic governance. This disagreement makes it difficult for the BRICS to present a clear non-Western vision of the world order. It also influences the group's internal dynamics, with India often trying to balance China's dominance through more decentralised, dialogue-focused initiatives. BRICS serves as a space where multiple civilisational narratives coexist, provided there are mechanisms to ensure dialogue, build consensus, and manage conflicts informally. Shared philosophical principles, such as harmony, community, and shared leadership responsibilities, can be applied to discussions about development justice, multipolarity, and sovereignty. Recognising these



common values enables India and China to collaborate effectively without losing their differences.

India and BRICS: Civilizational Ethos

The ongoing debate about BRICS is important, especially for India. The global political landscape has undergone significant changes since the group formed in the early 2000s. BRICS is a varied coalition made up of powers focused on different issues. These members lack a common overall strategy or shared vision (Nafey & Kashyap, 2020). These countries often differ in political systems, economic strength, and foreign policy directions. China's significant economic influence starkly contrasts with the more balanced aims of countries like India, Brazil, South Africa, and Russia (Kumar, 2018). Moreover, personal and societal links among BRICS nations are still underdeveloped, which makes the grouping loose and informal. Despite these differences, India sees value in BRICS as a collective force to counter what is often viewed as a Western-dominated and unequal global governance system. The BRICS nations share a normative criticism of the Bretton Woods institutions and the UN system, which still fail to adequately reflect the realities of a multipolar world (Dutta, 2021). Although their economic power has grown, their political influence remains relatively limited. India utilises BRICS to underscore its emerging status and advocate for the aspirations of the broader Global South, aligning with its civilisational values.

Pragmatic interests and civilisational values drive India's participation in BRICS. India views collectivising its platforms and agents in BRICS as a reservoir for its civilisational and institutional task of promoting the democratisation of global governance and South-South cooperation - activities that are offered to BRICS member states as an ode to India's former historical identity as a postcolonial champion of non-alignment and supporter of multilateralism. BRICS is at the hub of the broader shift in power to the Global South, with India supporting BRICS while strengthening its internal institutionalisation, promoting the use of cooperative mechanisms among members, and cautiously welcoming external institutionalisation that includes interested, like-minded developing countries.

India's civilisational worldview provides BRICS with a normative basis for its role within the organisation. For example, India's promotion of dialogue over dominance, multipolarity over unipolarity, and developmental equity over-exploitation supports a BRICS agenda of a more equitable global architecture (albeit with a multitude of competing actors). Ultimately, the effectiveness of BRICS will depend on its ability to transcend its members' internal contradictions and establish deeper levels of trust among its members and with the broader community of emerging powers.

Nye (2001) argues that the ability to attract and co-opt through foreign policy, political values, and culture is just as important as, if not more so, economic or military might. However, according to Dugin, this neoliberal framework of influence lacks the ingrained underpinnings that a civilisation is said to be built upon. According to him, when freedom and democracy are divorced from their metaphysical underpinnings and historical continuity, they become tools of cultural homogenisation rather than authentic expressions of civilisation. Dugin views soft power as a cover for ideational hegemony



that undermines authentic cultural identities, whereas Nye sees it as a civilising force that promotes global security and liberal principles (Kalinin, 2019). India appears to be pursuing a hybrid strategy that blends Alexander Dugin's concept of civilisational identity with Joseph Nye's soft power theory.

India balances its practical international participation with a deeper expression of cultural difference within BRICS, which offers a unique platform to promote its soft power and civilisational identity. Following Joseph Nye's concept of influence through appeal, India presents itself as a responsible and attractive partner through its efforts in health, education, digital innovation, and cultural exchange within the BRICS framework. However, its goals for global governance changes and focus on connections among ancient civilisations highlight a desire to resist cultural uniformity and amplify the voices of other civilisations. Therefore, India can both establish its civilisational identity and project modern soft power through BRICS, thereby creating a distinct identity that transcends Western liberalism and its alternatives. India seeks to establish a more inclusive and multipolar global order, resonating with the goals of BRICS, a multilateral entity that exists alongside the West-led order. The objective is derived from India's own historical identity as a non-Western culture with its unique intellectual traditions. BRICS provides a platform to highlight a model that promotes technological advancement and developmental expertise, along with a civilisational ethos, thereby enhancing soft power in the Global South.

The civilisational vision of BRICS is presented as a provider of "strategic autonomy of the non-West. This positions India's engagement not just in economic or geopolitical terms but more broadly as a civilisational assertion. This would be alongside China's Confucianism, Russia's Eurasianism, and Iran's Islamic republicanism. In this light, BRICS serves as a space that enables its members' diverse cultures and orientations to coalesce and share without being bound by a Western liberal agenda. However, ethnopluralism and cultural integrity could also lead to conflict. While preserving the distinct civilisational values of its members can add to the BRICS project, it could equally maintain distinct worldviews, policy interests, and historical tensions. The challenge is to manage the civilisational diversity in BRICS and realise economic and political cohesion, and a normative commitment to multipolarity without isolationist cultural identity and geopolitical rivalry.

Huntington would likely perceive the BRICS coalition as a strategic yet precarious bloc formed in response to Western hegemony. This perspective aligns with his broader argument that civilisational, rather than ideological, conflicts will govern the post-Cold War era. While BRICS represents a collective push for a multipolar world, Huntington's work challenges the notion that its members, who are rooted in distinct civilisations, lack a unifying cultural foundation, making sustained cooperation inherently difficult. He would interpret the emphasis on civilisational identity and cultural preservation as a double-edged sword. While it enables non-Western nations to exercise sovereignty and counter cultural homogenisation, it brings the danger of internal fragmentation due to alternative worldviews and regional aspirations. Therefore, in Huntington's view, BRICS might be an effective alliance in the short term. However, its stability in the long term is doubtful unless its members overcome their profound civilisational differences through shared interests and diplomatic equilibrium.



A significant motivating factor contributing to the growing popularity of BRICS is its commitment to uniting nations with diverse national interests, while also striving for enhanced strategic autonomy. Even nations that maintain relatively favourable relations with the West regard BRICS as a means to integrate more deeply into an increasingly fragmented global economy, progressively diminishing Western dominance. However, BRICS should not be perceived as a monolithic and self-proclaimed anti-American bloc; instead, there are ongoing internal discussions concerning the extent to which the bloc should explicitly challenge U.S. interests. While nations such as Russia view BRICS as a counter to Western dominance, others are more content with an approach that strives for multipolarity, yet does not sever relations with the United States. The success of BRICS in reshaping global governance will depend on whether it can reconcile these rival visions, ranging from strategic hedging to outright systemic revisionism, and how united the West is in its response.

Conclusion

India's involvement with the BRICS coalition transcends a mere strategic, economic, or geopolitical alignment; it is ultimately interconnected with a more expansive civilisational proposition that challenges the epistemic narratives of Western liberal internationalism. This paper argues that the emergence of BRICS should be interpreted not just as a pragmatic response to a changing multipolar world, but as part of a civilisational claim in which countries, including India, China, and Russia, seek to assert governance models rooted in their own. India's involvement with BRICS stands out because it lies between its history as a diverse, democratic nation born from colonial rule and a revival of a civilisational identity that has evolved over thousands of years of spiritual, philosophical, and political thought.

India often bases its foreign policy on its deep-rooted cultural values, particularly the concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, which translates to "the world is one family." This provides India with a moral foundation to view itself as a responsible global player. It is a different approach from the Western narratives, which usually emphasise liberal democracy and free-market economies as the standards for international order. Instead of conforming to the Western order, India focuses on its cultural heritage and civilisational values, advocating for a more comprehensive and diverse global community. It seeks to strike a balance between material interests and moral principles, presenting itself not only as an emerging power but also as a civilisational state that brings unique perspectives to global governance.

BRICS provides a crucial foundation for this vision. It enables India to lead reforms in global governance, act as a representative for the Global South, and resist pressures for cultural uniformity. India's emphasis on a multipolar structure and cultural diversity exemplifies its broader approach to fostering dialogue among different traditions, rather than endorsing the dominance of one single model. Within the BRICS framework, the relationship between India and China extends to various regions globally, where both states utilise civilisational narratives to influence these areas. India highlights shared colonial histories and spiritual connections to promote goodwill. They propel competing efforts in infrastructure, technology, and political involvement throughout the Global



South. At the same time, past interactions, like the dissemination of Buddhism and exchanges along the Silk Road, show that shared civilisational traits can facilitate dialogue instead of strife.

However, BRICS also faces its own conflicts. Economic inequalities, varied political systems, and conflicting historical narratives complicate the effort to maintain a unified identity rooted in civilisational diversity. For India, this presents both challenges and opportunities. Its impact will depend on how effectively it can balance civilisational dialogue with practical governance, employing diplomatic flexibility to strengthen its position while avoiding the pitfalls of rivalries among BRICS states.

References

- Allen, D., & Smith, M. (2012). Relations with the rest of the world. In N. Copsey & T. Haughton (Eds.), *The JCMS annual review of the European Union in 2011* (pp. 162–177). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Rumelili, B. (2014). *Conflict resolution and ontological security: Peace anxieties*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315796314>
- Acharya, A., & Buzan, B. (2007). Why is there no non-Western international relations theory? An introduction. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 7(3), 287–312. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26159492>
- Fukuyama, F. (2012). *The end of history and the last man*. Penguin Books.
- Wallerstein, I. (2004). *World-systems analysis: An introduction* (1st ed.). Duke University Press.
- Mahbubani, K. (2023). Contours of a future world order. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-9872-0_12
- Kissinger, H. (2014). *World order: Reflections on the character of nations and the course of history*. Allen Lane.
- Nafey, A., & Kashyap, A. (2022). BRICS and multipolarisation of the global order: It works for India. *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, 17(3/4), 170–189. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48772508>
- Cox, R. W., & Schechter, M. G. (2002). *The political economy of a plural world: Critical reflections on power, morals and civilisation*. Routledge.
- Coker, C. (2019). *The rise of the civilisational state*. Polity Press.
- Cox, R. W. (2000). Thinking about civilisations. *Review of International Studies*, 26(5), 217–234.
- Lyons, J. (2014). *Islam through Western eyes: From the Crusades to the War on Terrorism*. Columbia University Press.
- Huntington, S. P. (1996). *The clash of civilisations and the remaking of world order* (pp. 262–265). Penguin.



- Raghavan, P. S. (2017). The making of India's foreign policy: From non-alignment to multi-alignment. *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, 12(4), 326–341. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45342011>
- Mishra, R. (2023). From non-alignment to multi-alignment: Assessing India's foreign policy shift. *The Round Table*, 112(1), 43–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2023.2165367>
- Mahbubani, K. (2013). *The great convergence: Asia, the West, and the logic of one world*. Public Affairs.
- Acharya, A., & Buzan, B. (Eds.). (2010). *Non-Western international relations theory: Perspectives on and beyond Asia*. Routledge.
- Adib-Moghaddam, A. (2014). *A metahistory of the clash of civilisations: Us and them beyond Orientalism*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199333523.001.0001>
- Volodin, A. G. (2022). India as a civilisational state. *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences*, 92(Suppl 9), S827–S837. <https://doi.org/10.1134/S1019331622150102>
- Srivastava, J. (2023). The narratives and aesthetics of the civilisational state in the 'new' India. *International Affairs*, 99(2), 457–474. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia031>
- Kumar, R. (2018). India's role in BRICS: A comprehensive analysis. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 24(2), 1–19.
- Yeşiltaş, M. (2014). Turkey's quest for a 'new international order': The discourse of civilisation and the politics of restoration. *Perceptions*, 19(4), 43–76.
- Acharya, A. (2020). The myth of the 'civilisation state': Rising powers and the cultural challenge to world order. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 34(2), 139–156.
- Modi, N. (2021). National statement by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi at the COP26 Summit in Glasgow. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1768712>
- Jacques, M. (2012, July 19). China is a civilisation state. *The Economic Times*. <http://www.martinjacques.com/when-china-rules-the-world/china-is-a-civilization-state/>
- Kriesi, H., Grande, E., Lachat, R., Dolezal, M., Bornschier, S., & Frey, T. (2008). *West European politics in the age of globalisation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Öniş, Z., & Kutlay, M. (2019). Global shifts and the limits of the EU's transformative power in the European periphery: Comparative perspectives from Hungary and Turkey. *Government and Opposition*, 54(2), 226–253.
- Hall, I. (2019). *Modi and the reinvention of Indian foreign policy* (p. 83). Bristol University Press.
- Ollapally, D. M. (2018). India and the international order: Accommodation and adjustment. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 32(1), 61–74.
- Dutta, A. (2021). BRICS and the new global governance: India's role and influence. *Asian Geopolitics*, 15(2), 91–110.
- Nye, J. S. Jr. (2001). *The future of power*. Public Affairs.



Kalinin, K. (2019). Neo-Eurasianism and the Russian elite: The irrelevance of Aleksandr Dugin's geopolitics. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 35(5-6), 461-470.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1663050>

THE ORGANISATION OF TURKIC STATES: AN EMERGING ACTOR IN THE CONTEXT OF GEOPOLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS?

YUSUF ZIYA BÖLÜKBAŞI

yzb@anadolu.edu.tr

Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration,
Anadolu University, 26470, Eskişehir (Türkiye). <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4723-5977>

İLHAN BİLİCİ

ilhan.bilici@erdogan.edu.tr

Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration,
Recep Tayyip Erdogan University, Rize (Türkiye). <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4085-7274>

GÖKBERK YÜCEL

gokberk.yucel@amasya.edu.tr

Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration
Amasya University, Amasya (Türkiye). <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0292-1722>

Abstract

The Organisations of Turkic States (OTS), which aims to strengthen the Turkic world's historical and cultural linkages, appears as a key regional actor candidate in the context of globalisation and regionalisation dynamics of the international system. Formed in 1991 by the Turkic-speaking states that gained their independence with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this organisation plays a prominent role in cooperation, defence and economic integration (such as free trade, common currency and visa liberalisation), especially in the Eurasian region. In an environment where young states in the region face security and economic risks, the OTS has a major role in providing its members with the opportunity to develop a common policy against these risks. The OTS, which is built on the axis of the common historical, socio-cultural and linguistic ties of its members and can be read as a reflection of the idea of Turkism, claims to lead the establishment of a strong solidarity platform on a regional scale. In this context, the main purpose of the present study is to investigate the role and potential of the OTS in the international system with its historical foundations and current function. Although it is seen that the integration between the OTS countries is getting better day by day in the economic field, this is not the case in the field of political cooperation and security. As a result, the pressures of other global actors in the region and the fact that the OTS countries prioritise their own national interests indicate that the Turkic world integration is still far from being a regional actor.

Keywords

The Organisations of Turkic States (OTS), Caucasus and Central Asian (CCA), Turkic World, Rising Powers, Regional Actors.



Resumo

A Organização dos Estados Turcos (OTS), que visa fortalecer os laços históricos e culturais do mundo turco, surge como um importante candidato a ator regional no contexto da globalização e da dinâmica de regionalização do sistema internacional. Formada em 1991 pelos Estados de língua turca que conquistaram a sua independência com a dissolução da União Soviética, esta organização desempenha um papel proeminente na cooperação, defesa e integração económica (como o comércio livre, a moeda comum e a liberalização de vistos), especialmente na região eurasiática. Num ambiente em que os jovens Estados da região enfrentam riscos económicos e de segurança, a OTS tem um papel importante ao proporcionar aos seus membros a oportunidade de desenvolver uma política comum contra esses riscos. A OTS, que se baseia nos laços históricos, socioculturais e linguísticos comuns dos seus membros e pode ser interpretada como um reflexo da ideia do turquismo, afirma liderar o estabelecimento de uma forte plataforma de solidariedade à escala regional. Neste contexto, o principal objetivo do presente estudo é investigar o papel e o potencial da OTS no sistema internacional, com as suas bases históricas e função atual. Embora se observe que a integração entre os países da OTS está a melhorar dia a dia no campo económico, o mesmo não se verifica no campo da cooperação política e da segurança. Como resultado, as pressões de outros atores globais na região e o facto de os países da OTS priorizarem os seus próprios interesses nacionais indicam que a integração do mundo turco ainda está longe de ser um ator regional.

Palavras-chave

Organizações dos Estados Turcos (OTS), Cáucaso e Ásia Central (CCA), Mundo Turco, Potências Emergentes, Atores Regionais.

How to cite this article

Bölükbaşı, Yusuf Ziya, Bilici, İlhan & Yücel, Gökberk (2025). The Organisation of Turkic States: An Emerging Actor in the Context of Geopolitical Opportunities and Limitations?. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 389-410. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.21>

Article submitted on 16th May 2025 and accepted for publication on 06th September 2025.





THE ORGANISATION OF TURKIC STATES: AN EMERGING ACTOR IN THE CONTEXT OF GEOPOLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS?

YUSUF ZİYA BÖLÜKBAŞI

İLHAN BİLİCİ

GÖKBERK YÜCEL

Introduction

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Türkiye, believing it had eliminated its primary security threat, soon encountered even more complex and multifaceted security challenges, including ethnic conflicts in the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus; the rise of PKK terrorism; tensions with neighbouring countries; setbacks in the European Union (EU) accession process; economic crises; and political instability. Amid these difficulties, the newly independent Turkic states of the Caucasus and Central Asia (CCA), emerging from the Soviet collapse, represented a strategic and cultural opportunity for Türkiye. Seeking to recalibrate its foreign policy and reduce dependence on the Western alliance—particularly the United States and the EU—Türkiye moved swiftly to establish diplomatic and economic ties with these nascent states. Likewise, the Turkic republics, burdened by the Soviet legacy and lacking prior experience in modern state- and nation-building, were able to assert themselves in the international system with Türkiye's support and guidance. These early interactions laid the historical foundations of the Organisation of Turkic States.

The institutional foundations of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) can be traced back to the Summit of Heads of State of Turkic Speaking Countries, initiated by Turkish President Turgut Özal in 1992. Initially involving Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, these summits laid the groundwork for the institutionalisation of cooperation, culminating in the establishment of the Turkic Council through the Nakhchivan Agreement in 2009. This body was rebranded as the Organisation of Turkic States in 2021, marking a shift from informal cultural and linguistic ties to structured political and economic collaboration. This development is widely regarded as the emergence of a potential regional actor in Eurasian geopolitics. However, the question remains whether the OTS can truly evolve into a significant regional power



capable of influencing its geopolitical environment amidst global actors. The underlying assumption of this study is that the OTS has not yet accomplished its objective of evolving into an organisation that facilitates collaboration between Turkish communities and global and regional actors in Eurasian geopolitics, with the aim of promoting political stability and economic cooperation. This study seeks to explore this question through the lens of neo-realism, a theory in international relations that emphasises systemic dynamics, state interests, and the distribution of power (Waltz, 1979), and which argues that identity-based policies may gain traction during periods of systemic transition. Concurrently, the present theory is regarded as conducive to delineating the approaches to be adopted in this study for the concepts of regional actors and integration. The process of political, economic and cultural rapprochement between states in the CCA is expressed by the concept of integration. According to neo-realists, the process of integration is only possible if it is compatible with the balance of power. Waltz (1979) contests the notion of international organisations or integration processes as autonomous centres of power, proposing instead that they are instruments reflecting the interests of the major powers. Indeed, this theory posits that states function as the principal agents in this process. Therefore, regional actors are congruent with the emergence of powerful states at the lower levels of the international system. Although not explicitly mentioned in Waltz's approach, this scenario, in accordance with the power distribution approach, suggests the emergence of medium-sized regional hegemonies alongside the global poles within the system. The integration process is a means to facilitate the harmonisation of interests between major powers.

The following discussion will address the OTS's efforts to achieve such harmonisation between the U.S., Russia, China and the EU in the CCA region. However, the primary concern pertains to the OTS's regional agency. The concept of a regional agency thus offers a microcosmic reflection of the systemic polarisation (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The issue of whether regional multipolarity, which has been debated since the early 2000s, is represented by the OTS in the CCA geography will be examined on the basis of the organisation's political and economic integration issues. In order to establish whether the OTS can be considered a regional actor in the context of its political and economic integration within Turkish geography, it is necessary to include in the analysis the national interests of the states that constitute the OTS, the effects of the international system, and the competition between the global powers active in the region.

In this regard, the current study aims to explore the role and potential of the OTS in the international system with its historical foundations and current function, and in connection with this aim, the study was designed by adopting the single case study design (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Within a single case study design, researchers focus on a single phenomenon, individual, group, or event, and perform a multidimensional in-depth investigation for the specified case. In this study, the OTS has been determined as the single case, and the examination and discussion were developed within the framework of it. The study also employs the historical analysis method, which seeks to uncover meaning through the systematic interrogation of 'what', 'why', and 'how' questions concerning historical events and ideas (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). Sources include international academic literature, OTS summit proceedings, and regional news and analyses. The analysis first examines the historical evolution and institutional



structure of the OTS, followed by a discussion of the economic and strategic dimensions of Turkic integration, and concludes with an interpretation of the findings.

Organisation of the Turkic States: Historical background

Throughout history, political unity among the Turks—who spread from the Eastern Eurasian steppes to Europe, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Anatolia—has rarely been achieved, with the notable exceptions of the Hun and Gök-Türk Empires (Taşağıl, 2018). Attempts during the final phase of the Ottoman Empire, such as the Basmachi Movement, ultimately failed. Following these developments, the Republic of Türkiye emerged as the only independent Turkic state, while most other Turkic communities remained under Soviet, Chinese, or Iranian rule. Due to the Soviet threat, identity-based foreign policy constraints, and internal weaknesses, Türkiye was compelled to limit its engagement with the broader Turkic world. However, the independence of the Turkic republics following the Soviet collapse was seen as a historic opportunity. President Turgut Özal declared that Türkiye could regain its global influence after 400 years, emphasising the strategic importance of Turkic independence (Aydın, 2010). Several factors contributed to Türkiye's proactive engagement with the newly independent Caucasus and Central Asian (CCA) states, including the crisis in Turkish foreign policy, the rising use of identity as a diplomatic tool, the regional power vacuum, and Türkiye's aspiration to serve as a model state (Bölükbaşı, 2023; Ayata, 2010; Sander, 2006). Accordingly, Türkiye was among the first to recognise the independence of these states and swiftly established diplomatic relations. High-level visits by President Özal and Prime Minister Demirel resulted in the signing of 140 bilateral agreements (Yalçınkaya, 2013), and Demirel's slogan "From the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China" came to symbolise the foreign policy vision of the era. During his time as Prime Minister and subsequently as President, Demirel did not merely produce chauvinistic rhetoric; he also pursued a rational strategy. The basis of this strategy was the maintenance of Türkiye's position, whilst also ensuring the continued provision of aid to Azerbaijan. This was achieved by engaging in shuttle diplomacy between Moscow and Washington during the First Karabakh War (Kürkçü, 2019). Meanwhile, the newly independent CCA countries—characterised by fragmented ethnic structures, weak economies, limited state traditions, landlocked geographies, and rigid bureaucracies—faced significant internal and external pressures. In need of support to ensure their security, build state institutions, and maintain sovereignty, these countries turned to international cooperation. In this context, the foundations of a regional organisation to serve the mutual interests of Türkiye and the CCA states were laid in 1992.

Prior to deliberating on the establishment of an organisation among the countries of the Turkic world and the process of its formation, it would be beneficial to examine Türkiye's initial hegemonic approach and the consequences it engendered. The relations that began between Türkiye and the Turkic states that gained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union essentially represented a unilateral process. Within the framework of the aforementioned reasons, Türkiye initiated the establishment of relations with regional countries and laid the foundations for institutional structures. It is evident that during this process, relations between Türkiye and the states in the CCA manifested a



hegemonic-hierarchical character. However, it should be noted that this situation may be misleading. The absence of modern state experience in these societies, coupled with Türkiye's inherent need for greater openness towards the region, naturally resulted in relations commencing under Türkiye's patronage. The fundamental reason for the failure of the CCA policy was our attempt to adopt a big brother role in the region and our condescending attitude towards other countries (Aydın, 2010). The CCA countries would react to this situation in a short time and, in subsequent processes, begin to pursue independent policies, influenced both by their relations with global powers and their own local nationalism.

The First Summit of the Heads of Turkic Speaking States, held in Ankara on 30–31 October 1992, marked the initial step toward the integration of the Turkic world. These summits, later formalised under the title "Heads of State of Turkic Speaking Countries" in 1998, evolved into a structured organisation with the signing of the Nakhchivan Agreement in 2009, leading to the establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking Countries, commonly known as the Turkic Council. Since 2010, summits have been conducted under this framework. Uzbekistan officially joined the Council—comprising Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan—at the Bishkek Summit in 2019. At the 8th Summit held in Istanbul, the organisation was renamed the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS), and its institutional structure was significantly revised. Turkmenistan and Hungary participated in this Summit as observer members (turkicstates.org, 25.04.2025). The declaration issued after the Istanbul Summit emphasised preserving the principles of the Nakhchivan Agreement, expanding and institutionalising the OTS, advancing the Turkic World 2040 Vision, congratulating Azerbaijan on its Karabakh victory, and expressing support for both Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan in their respective regional conflicts. It also highlighted the revival of economic ties, increased diplomatic engagement, and coordinated responses to shared challenges (turkicstates.org, 26.05.2025). The Istanbul Summit produced three key outcomes: (1) the Turkic Council was restructured into the OTS, (2) the unification of Turkic states under a single organisational framework was effectively completed, and (3) a long-term development strategy was formalised through the "2040 Turkic World Vision" document (Mustofaev, 2022, pp. 107–109). This strategic document outlines four primary areas of cooperation: political-security, economic-sectoral, public, and external relations. More importantly, it aims to enhance the OTS's regional and international influence through concrete projects and policies responsive to geopolitical dynamics (Baki, 2022). Notably, the vision foresees deeper engagement with the European Union via Hungary's observer status and proposes strengthening the OTS's representation in Budapest as a hub for multi-layered cooperation with European institutions, including the Visegrád Group (Mustofaev, 2022).

The new institutional structure of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) comprises the Council of Heads of State, the Council of Foreign Ministers, the Committee of Senior Officials, the Committee of Elders, and the General Secretariat. Member states include Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, while Hungary, Turkmenistan, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus hold observer status. The Council of Heads of State, chaired by the rotating Chairmanship-in-Office, serves as the primary decision-making body. The General Secretariat, based in Istanbul, coordinates



and supports OTS activities. Subsidiary bodies include the International Organisation of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY), the International Turkic Academy, the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic Speaking States (TURKPA), the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation, the Turkic Business Council (established in 2011), and the Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry (established in 2019 at the Astana Economic Forum). Among these, TURKSOY is headquartered in Ankara, the International Turkic Academy in Nur-Sultan, and both TURKPA and the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation in Baku (turkicstates.org; Sarıkaya, 2021). Consolidating these bodies under the OTS framework enhances institutional integration and cooperation within the Turkic world, especially given that not all OTS members participate in every sub-organisation (Mustofaev, 2022). While institutional integration has been achieved, its political and economic implications raise ongoing debates about the OTS's potential as a regional actor.

The 'Big Game' again: The OTS in the face of the clash of power between global and regional actors

Turkestan and the Caucasus have long been arenas of great power rivalry, a pattern that continues today. In the Caucasus, the struggle for dominance between the Ottoman Empire and the Safavid–Qajar dynasties was joined by Tsarist Russia in the early 19th century, which, within a century, established control over the region—an extension of the broader power struggle in Turkestan. Located between British-controlled India and Russia, Turkestan was politically fragmented and governed by weak dynasties, making it vulnerable to colonisation. The Anglo-Afghan Wars and Russia's occupation of Turkestan exemplified this rivalry, famously termed the "Great Game" by Hopkirk (2021). Although Central Asian societies briefly gained independence following the fall of the Tsarist regime, they were soon absorbed into the Soviet Union and subsequently became a "forgotten region" (Zabortseva, 2012) until the USSR's collapse. With the end of the Cold War, the region once again drew the attention of global powers due to its strategic location, abundant natural resources, and market potential. While Russia's post-Soviet dominance initially prevented the kind of violent rivalries seen in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, recent developments—such as intensified global economic competition, China's expanding influence, the Taliban's full control of Afghanistan, and the erosion of Russian power—have re-positioned the region at the centre of international geopolitical competition (Alaranta & Silvan, 2022).

The main global and regional actors competing for influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia (CCA) region are Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, and Türkiye. The dynamics of competition and distribution of power among these actors exert a significant influence on the policies of the countries within the CCA, as well as on the role of the OTS as a regional actor. Among these, Russia stands as the most dominant power, having historically ruled the region during both the Tsarist and Soviet eras. Post-Cold War, Russia has sought to reassert its influence through institutional and socio-cultural channels, particularly in shaping identity. The Eurasianist perspective advanced by Dugin (2014) underpins the "Near Periphery Doctrine," asserting that control over the Eurasian heartland is essential for Russia to remain a great power. Politically and militarily, Russia has leveraged the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS, 1991), the Collective



Security Treaty (1994), and its successor, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO, 2002); economically, it has utilised platforms such as the Central Asian Cooperation Organisation (joined in 2004) and the Eurasian Economic Community (2000) (Arı, 2010). Russia's position with respect to the OTS can, on occasion, be said to manifest a paradoxical structure, while at other times this can be considered complementary, in regard to its historical foundations and strategic orientations. Historically, the propensity of Turkish communities to unite has invariably provoked concern on the part of Russia, compelling it to adopt an assertive stance. The stance adopted by Tsarist Russia towards the rising Turkish nationalist movement in the Ottoman Empire and the uprisings beginning in Turkestan became even more severe after the Bolshevik Revolution. During the Soviet era, Turkic communities were kept distant from Ankara. At the time, Türkiye adopted a policy of maintaining the status quo in the face of pressure from the Soviet Union regarding this issue. Following the termination of the Cold War, the Russian Federation initially adopted a reserved stance with regard to the process of rapprochement that commenced among the Turkic states. Indeed, the failure to achieve the desired integration over time and the resulting weakness led to the OTS being seen in the region as a complementary element rather than a formation against Russia (Ongun, 2022). Nevertheless, Russia continues to adopt a cautious and controlled stance towards the OTS. Alongside Russia, China has emerged as a rising regional actor with a strategy built on three pillars: security, energy, and trade. From a security standpoint, China is sensitive about East Turkestan and is cautious not to encourage pan-Turkic sentiments among Central Asian states due to their ethnic ties with the Uighurs. On energy, China's agreements with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are vital to meeting the resource demands of its growing economy. In trade, the region is central to China's Belt and Road Initiative, which envisions a continuous trade route from China to Europe. To realise its goals, China utilises the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), in which Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan hold full membership, to secure and expand its interests across the region (Clarke, 2013; Yujin, 2019; Swanström, 2011). A close examination of China's comprehensive strategy concerning the OTS reveals a transition in its approach, initially marked by caution but subsequently evolving into a security-centric and ideological stance, particularly following its institutionalisation in 2021. Despite the emergence of pan-Turkism in the region and the enhancement of collaboration among Turkic states being perceived as potential challenges, it can be posited that China is strategically leveraging the economic prospects engendered by the OTS (Aghjeh, 2022; Mai, 2021).

As in other regions, the United States and the European Union have pursued distinct strategies in the Caucasus and Central Asia (CCA) region to counterbalance Russian and Chinese influence. The U.S. approach revolves around two core objectives: securing control over energy resources and their transportation routes to Western markets, and reducing the strategic influence of Russia and China (Kireçci, 2011). In essence, American foreign policy in the region seeks to curb Russian and Chinese dominance by leveraging control over energy (İşeri, 2009). This emphasis on energy became a central pillar of U.S. strategy after the Cold War, particularly as the country's share in global energy production dropped from nearly 50% in 1945 to around 20% today, intensifying the need to access alternative sources (Faulkner, 2021). Similarly, the EU's policy towards the CCA



region highlights energy security as a strategic priority, particularly in ensuring diversified supply routes to Western markets. While promoting democratic governance and universal norms is a stated aim of EU foreign policy, the prevalence of authoritarian regimes and weak human rights standards in the region creates a normative dilemma. In practice, the EU tends to prioritise its political and economic interests, with energy considerations taking precedence (Asma & Koca, 2021).

The CCA policies of global powers have been briefly reviewed; however, to assess the economic, political, and military strategies of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) in response, it is essential to examine the role of Türkiye—arguably the most influential actor shaping the OTS. As previously noted, the OTS has developed largely under Türkiye’s patronage and reflects Ankara’s broader regional vision. Following the Syrian conflict and the war in Ukraine, a growing body of analysis identifies Türkiye as a pivotal actor in five key geopolitical regions, with the CCA standing out through the OTS, whose institutional architecture Türkiye has helped to establish. Economically, Türkiye’s strategic partnerships in the region pose a potential challenge to Russian dominance (Furlong et al., 2025), while Duran (2023) argues that the West should support Türkiye as a balancing force against China’s expanding influence. In reality, however, Türkiye faces considerable structural limitations that hinder its capacity to rival Russian and Chinese hegemony in the region, particularly in three areas: security, trade, and political leadership. As a NATO member, Türkiye is constrained in its ability to confront Russia on security matters, curbing its strategic reach. In trade, the lack of a robust transportation and logistics network across the CCA region, coupled with China’s infrastructural dominance and commercial connectivity via Iran, exposes Türkiye’s limited economic leverage. Politically, authoritarian governance and strong centralised leadership in CCA states diminish the potential for deep, institutionalised cooperation. Despite Türkiye’s favourable bilateral ties with regional leaders, their entrenched alignment with Russia often takes precedence over relations with Ankara (Alaranta & Silvan, 2022).

The OTS, regarded as an emerging actor in the wake of the Ukraine War, becomes attractive primarily through the realisation of its members’ common interests. Therefore, it is essential to analyse the economic and political dimensions of the organisation.

Economic Integration: Energy, New Trade Routes and Cooperation among Member States

The Turkic world holds a significant position in the global economy due to its geopolitical location and natural resources. The combined population of OTS member and observer states reaches approximately 170 million, covering 4.5 million square kilometres with an economic output exceeding 1.5 trillion dollars—ranking them as the 13th largest economic bloc globally (Kocaman, 2022; Baghirov, 2022). In terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), these countries collectively account for around 2 per cent of the global economy, with a total GDP of 2 trillion dollars. Although Russia and China maintain economic dominance in the region, the strategic importance of the Turkic states has created a landscape where global and regional powers, particularly the U.S. and the EU, experience both overlapping interests and economic competition. Following the



institutionalisation of the OTS, issues such as joint investments, trade development, and economic integration among member states have gained increasing prominence (Koçak, 2023).

Economic opportunities in the Turkic world centre on three main areas: hydrocarbon resources, trade routes, and economic cooperation within the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS). On energy, strategic infrastructure projects such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum, the Southern Gas Corridor, and its components TANAP and TAP have aimed to transport the region's hydrocarbon wealth to Western markets while prioritising cooperation among OTS members. These initiatives have enhanced the region's geostrategic importance for the West. The "OTS Energy Cooperation Programme for 2023–2027" and the "OTS Energy Coordination Committee," both launched in Almaty, further reflect a coordinated strategy to utilise energy as a tool for regional peace and stability. Trade connectivity is another key dimension, particularly through the Central Corridor, a component of China's Belt and Road Initiative that has gained prominence amid the Ukraine-Russia War. Complementing this, the Zangezur Corridor—under construction after the Karabakh victory—offers further integration potential. TRACECA (Transit Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia), headquartered in Baku, provides land, rail, and sea connections between the EU and Kyrgyzstan and supports economic integration among OTS states (Yalçinkaya & Güzel, 2021). Regarding intra-OTS trade, Türkiye is the largest economy among members, followed by Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Hungary, and Kyrgyzstan. While the share of intra-group exports rose from 13.9% in 2016 to 25.9% in 2021, this accounts for only 3% of the members' total trade volume, which stands at approximately 700 billion dollars. Moreover, the share of these countries in Türkiye's foreign trade remains low at 1.94%, highlighting the underdeveloped nature of economic integration (Baghirov, 2022; Kocaman, 2022; Sarıkaya, 2021; İstikbal, 2021). Türkiye has supported the region through investments, loans, and aid since its independence, notably via the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), which has led numerous initiatives (TIKA, 2025). Economic coordination has been prioritised in OTS summits: the 2013 Gabala Summit focused on transport networks, the 2014 Bodrum Summit on tourism, and the 2019 establishment of the Union of Turkic Chambers of Commerce and Industry (TCCI) marked a step toward institutional economic cooperation. The "Turkic World Vision-2040" sets a long-term agenda for governance, digitalisation, and investment diversification (Koçak, 2023, p. 122). Most recently, the Samarkand Summit saw the establishment of the Turkic Investment Fund—the first joint financial institution of the Turkic world—based on equal capital contributions by member states (turkicstates.org, 2022). These developments signal a growing emphasis on deepening economic integration in the coming period.

The economic structures of the OTS member states are shaped significantly by their hydrocarbon resources. Central Asia is among the world's richest regions in this regard: Kazakhstan holds 30 billion barrels of oil and 2.4 trillion cubic metres of gas; Turkmenistan has 7.5 trillion cubic metres of gas (Kireçci, 2011); Azerbaijan possesses 7 billion barrels of oil and 2.5 trillion cubic metres of gas (worldometers.info; iea.org); and Uzbekistan has 1.8 trillion cubic metres of gas and 594 million barrels of oil (deik.org). In contrast, Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye lack significant energy resources, with Türkiye meeting 92.8% of its energy demand through imports (Yalçın & Doğan, 2023).



This dependency is a key driver of Türkiye's CCA policy, as it seeks both to meet its energy needs and enhance its geopolitical role by becoming a key transit route for energy exports to Western markets. Kazakhstan effectively leverages its energy wealth in foreign policy, pursuing a multi-vector strategy aimed at balancing the interests of China, Russia, the U.S., and the EU to curb Russian dominance and bolster its regional influence (Zabortseva, 2012; Omelicheva & Du, 2018; Nurgaliyeva, 2015). Its diversified foreign partnerships have attracted substantial infrastructure and pipeline investments from countries such as the U.S., Italy, the UK, and China. Kazakhstan's expectations from the OTS include securing alternative energy export routes, diversifying its economic base, and expanding access to global markets (Aydın & Liui, 2024). These aims align closely with the interests of Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. For Kyrgyzstan, whose economy is relatively weak and resource-poor, economic cooperation within the OTS is of vital importance. Uzbekistan, sharing similar economic partners with Türkiye and Kazakhstan, also emphasises economic collaboration as a core element of its multidimensional foreign policy under President Mirziyoyev (Aydın & Liui, 2024). Azerbaijan likewise places economic relations at the centre of its engagement with the OTS, particularly through its focus on the Central Corridor, which aims to link Central Asia and Europe while mitigating Russian influence via cooperation with China. Azerbaijan's strategic motivations include energy and logistics, reinforced by its victory in the Second Karabakh War and the subsequent construction of the Zangezur Corridor. This corridor not only elevates Azerbaijan's geopolitical significance but also promises to enhance trade connectivity, with an estimated 10 million tonnes of cargo expected to be transported over 13 years, benefiting all OTS members, especially Türkiye and Azerbaijan (Rickleton, 2024a; Anadolu Agency, 2022).

In addition to the economic potential of the OTS and the economic capacities and approaches of its member states, it is essential to examine the policies of global and regional powers in Central Asia. Since the independence of the CCA countries, the United States has provided over \$9 billion in direct aid for security, democracy, and economic development, alongside more than \$50 billion in loans and technical assistance from American financial institutions, which reportedly generated \$31 billion in local employment. These efforts have been viewed as tools to counterbalance Russian and Chinese influence. A significant recent event provides another important clue regarding the U.S.'s CCA policy. This is the declaration signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia with Trump's mediation. While the political ramifications of the declaration between the two countries will be assessed at a later date, it is imperative to address its economic implications in the present context. The route, formerly known as Zengezur and now called TRIPP, has been referred to as the Trump corridor. It has been leased by the U.S. for 99 years. It is evident that this strategic manoeuvre will have a dual impact. Firstly, it will serve to diminish Russia's influence within the given region, thereby increasing pressure on Iran. Conversely, it will elevate the United States to a position of prominence with respect to trade relations and the transfer of energy resources among the EU, the OTS, and China. The advantages of this route are manifold, including a 10-15 per cent reduction in energy transport costs, an increase in freight volume to 15 million tonnes, the creation of a \$100 billion trade volume, an increase in the national income of Azerbaijan and Armenia, and Türkiye's rising power and influence in the region, which



will enable it to act as an agent for the renewal of Armenia's infrastructure. It has been argued that the primary benefit of economic integration among countries in the region is that it can lead to lasting peace, as evidenced by the example of the relationship between Turks and Armenians (Ryzhko & Sabirova, 2025). The European Union, meanwhile, has focused primarily on energy policy, aiming to double the capacity of the Southern Gas Corridor and signing a Memorandum of Understanding to secure the flow of 20 billion cubic metres of gas from the region by 2027. Economically, the EU remains Türkiye's main partner and has made significant investments in the region. Russia, however, continues to hold the greatest economic sway over the CCA countries, accounting for 85% of the value generated through the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Following the Ukraine War, many CCA states aligned with EU sanctions, which in turn boosted intra-regional trade (Koçak, 2023). There has also been a growing trend to reduce Russian economic dominance by diversifying partnerships. The decision by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to decline invitations to BRICS' 16th anniversary event reflects their intent to assert economic autonomy amid shifting geopolitical dynamics (Rickleton, 2024b). Nevertheless, Russia maintains a strong presence through its energy companies, with Gazprom and Rosatom securing agreements to construct nuclear power plants in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (rfe/rl, 27.12.2024). Alongside Russia, China represents the other major economic actor in the region. Since the independence of the Turkic republics, China's trade turnover in the region has increased 60-fold. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has funded infrastructure projects, including transportation corridors, energy pipelines, and trade agreements to strengthen connectivity and economic integration across the Caucasus and Central Asia (Koçak, 2023). Key initiatives such as the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-China railway and energy transfer deals with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan further highlight China's growing regional influence (Rickleton, 2024c).

Security and Politics

Security issues and political relations are at least as vital as economic considerations for the CCA countries, if not more so. Following independence, these states faced significant security challenges, including border and ethnic tensions inherited from the Soviet era, the rise of radical religious groups, and disputes over water resources—all contributing to strained inter-state relations in the Turkestan region. The border and ethnic disputes originated from administrative arrangements imposed during Tsarist and Soviet rule. Notable examples include the Uzbek-Kyrgyz clashes in Osh, repeated changes in the status of the Karakalpak Autonomous Region, ongoing border disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and situations where states must traverse neighbouring territories to access their own capitals (Arı, 2010). Among these, the Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia has had particularly profound regional and international implications. The roots of this conflict date back to the early 19th century, when Russia expanded into the Caucasus, defeating the Qajars and occupying the region. Although Turks were the majority in Karabakh, Russian authorities began settling Armenians—viewed as politically aligned—in the region to create a strategic buffer against the Ottomans and Qajars. This policy continued during the Soviet era, and by the 1980s, the



region's demography had shifted dramatically from 90% Turkish to 78% Armenian. Following the USSR's dissolution, Armenian separatist demands led to violent clashes, and with Russian military support, Armenians occupied Karabakh and carried out ethnic cleansing (Bölükbaşı, 2023). Beyond territorial disputes, the water-sharing issues among Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan and the threat of radical religious groups—exacerbated by the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan—pose ongoing challenges. While partial agreements have addressed water concerns, radicalisation persists, fueled by the presence of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates in the Fergana Valley and East Turkestan, as well as Iranian influence. In response, CCA states have adopted legal and policy measures aimed at reinforcing secularism and social resilience (Cumhuriyet, 2025). Lastly, the long-standing dispute over the legal status of the Caspian Sea among Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan—whether it should be classified as a sea or lake—was settled in 2018 through a multilateral agreement (Euronews, 2018).

In addition to persistent regional security challenges, the strategic rivalry among global and regional powers significantly shapes the geopolitical landscape of the CCA countries. The United States has prioritised diplomatic engagement in the region to curtail Russian and Chinese influence, while also expressing concern over Iran and the spread of radical Islam. However, energy security remains its primary focus. Following Donald Trump's re-election, U.S. strategy appears to be shifting, as reflected in Vice President Vance's statement that Russia should not remain China's junior partner (WSJ, 2025) and ongoing diplomatic efforts to end the Ukraine War. Analysts suggest that Trump's CCA policy will largely hinge on his relations with Russia, China, and Türkiye (Painner, 2024). Current U.S. actions—such as new sanctions on Iran and warm overtures toward Russia against China—underscore the priority given to strategic and geopolitical interests. Meanwhile, China emphasises East Turkestan as a key security concern in its relations with the region. Fearing that the OTS might support Uyghur independence and thus threaten its territorial integrity, China exerts political pressure through the SCO. However, the CCA countries consistently reassure China that the OTS has no such agenda and does not intervene in the affairs of Turkic groups abroad. China has also deepened its influence by selling an air defence system to Uzbekistan (Standish, 2025), thus extending its reach beyond the economic sphere. Despite this, Russia remains the dominant political and security actor in the region, largely through mechanisms like the CIS and CSTO. Yet, since the Ukraine War, there has been a growing effort by CCA states to reduce Russian dominance. For example, while Türkiye voted at the UN General Assembly on 1st March 2022 to demand Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine, CCA countries abstained—mainly due to their entanglement with Russian-led organisations and Türkiye's NATO membership (Mustofaev, 2022). As Brzezinski (2021) notes, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have taken specific steps to foster national identity and curb Russian influence in Turkestan. This trend continues under Tokayev, who emphasises economic integration and a new security architecture for the Turkic world (Kazakh MFA, 2024). Similarly, Uzbek Foreign Minister Kamilov's (2024) remarks on a pragmatic, multilateral foreign policy signal a strategic distancing from Moscow. The approaches adopted by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are influenced by systemic factors, namely their relations with global powers and their national interests. Furthermore, the presence of rising nationalism in the region is another factor that is relevant in this context. Additionally, the objectives of the two



countries differ from those of the international organisations to which they belong. However, Russian analysts view these moves as attempts to undermine CSTO dominance. Commentator Kirsanov claims that a Central Asian security architecture without Russia is unrealistic and accuses Tokayev of being backed by British intelligence (Asia24.media, 2024). Russian warnings, citing Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan's pro-NATO tilt as a costly mistake during the Karabakh conflict, serve as veiled threats to CCA states. These pressures limit the manoeuvring capacity of smaller countries like Kyrgyzstan, which has postponed implementation of the common Turkic alphabet, fearing a backlash from Moscow (RFE/rl, 03.10.2024). Ultimately, it is yet to be determined how Russia will respond to the declaration that was signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia under the leadership of the United States. Despite maintaining an official silence on the matter, the ongoing challenges in Russia's relationship with the U.S., compounded by the ongoing costs of the Ukraine War, have led to concerns regarding the potential loss of a pivotal region such as the Caucasus. Concurrently, President Trump is endeavouring to emulate the Abraham Accords between Arab states and Israel during his inaugural term, this time between Armenia and the Turkic world (Holland, 2025). In addition to its economic benefits, TRIPP is regarded as having the potential to provide the U.S. with significant power in the Caucasus from a political and strategic perspective, and could also potentially undermine Russia's hegemony in Turkestan.

The deep-rooted problems in the CCA region and the impact of global power competition have significantly shaped the dynamics among Turkic states and their engagement with the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS), revealing the political meaning attributed to the organisation by its members. From an external perspective, Aneschi & Grigoryan (2022) argue that despite the post-Ukraine War environment enabling more autonomous behaviour by Turkic states, their integration efforts remain vague and rhetorically hollow. This view gains clarity through an analysis of inter-CCA relations since 1992, when the foundations of the OTS were laid with the Summits of Turkic Speaking Heads of State—initiated under Türkiye's patronage to navigate its foreign policy challenges. CCA countries joined to integrate into the international system and benefit from Türkiye's support, yet during the First Karabakh War, the organisation proved ineffective as members, except Türkiye, failed to support Azerbaijan. Political integration remained limited due to Türkiye's missteps and the internal and external agendas of the CCA states; notably, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan long refrained from summit participation (Bölükbaşı, 2020). The 2009 Nakhchivan Agreement marked a turning point by initiating institutionalisation and transforming the Turkic Council into the OTS, prioritising political and security cooperation. Since then, the OTS has faced three major tests. First, during the Second Karabakh War in 2020, the OTS supported Azerbaijan's military operations to reclaim its occupied territories, a campaign bolstered by Turkish-made UAVs. Second, during the Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border clashes, the OTS expressed support for Kyrgyzstan. Third, following the unrest in Kazakhstan in January 2022, OTS foreign ministers convened an emergency meeting and backed the Kazakh government. However, as the situation escalated, Kazakhstan turned to the CSTO for military assistance, exposing the OTS's limited crisis-response capacity. Member states' divergent expectations from the OTS further complicate integration: Türkiye and Kazakhstan seek



regional and global influence; Azerbaijan aims to consolidate support against Armenia; Uzbekistan aspires to regional leadership; and Kyrgyzstan prioritises political and economic stability (Aydın & Liui, 2024). These differing priorities underscore the absence of a unified vision. A recent incident exemplifies this fragmentation: at the Samarkand Summit, the EU offered a €12 billion aid package in exchange for the CCA states' recognition of the Greek Cypriot Administration and endorsement of UN resolutions on Cyprus. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan initiated diplomatic engagement with the Greek Cypriot side, refraining from siding with Türkiye on what it considers a national cause—unlike the past solidarity shown by Islamic countries (Güller, 2025). This stance sparked disappointment in Turkish public opinion and raised questions about the OTS's credibility. Although the TRNC's admission as an observer had initially generated optimism, its exclusion from the 2023 Astana meeting signalled growing disillusionment (Karaveli, 2024). Ultimately, the OTS has fallen short of meeting political and security expectations, revealing the fragile unity among its members.

Conclusion

With the end of the Cold War, the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) emerged as an identity-based international organisation initiated by Türkiye, shaped by its efforts to address the challenges faced by both itself and the CCA countries in response to evolving geopolitical dynamics. The OTS represents a significant attempt to foster political, economic, and cultural integration among Turkic-speaking societies that have been fragmented under separate political entities for centuries. However, the question remains: is the OTS becoming a rising actor in the CCA region in the face of competing international organisations and global powers? To address this, it is essential to assess the extent of political and economic integration within the organisation and to analyse its relations with other actors in the context of regional and global developments.

In economic terms, the OTS has gained positive momentum with the deepening of its institutionalisation following the Nakhchivan Agreement. The primary motivation of member states appears to be economic cooperation, supported by Türkiye's status as one of the world's twenty largest economies and the CCA countries' rich natural resources. However, significant challenges remain. First, for meaningful integration, OTS member states should rank among each other's top ten trading partners; for instance, Türkiye, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan—as well as observer members like the TRNC, Hungary, and Turkmenistan—should feature prominently in Kazakhstan's foreign trade statistics. Currently, intra-OTS trade constitutes only 3% of the members' total trade volume, a notably low figure. Moreover, the combination of vast geography, low population density, and abundant underground resources contrasts starkly with the low GNP rates across the region, highlighting structural economic deficiencies. Under current conditions, the OTS lacks the economic capacity to rival global actors such as the U.S., EU, Russia, or China. Indeed, the protocol signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia, leasing TRIPP to the U.S. for 99 years, exemplifies the inability of OTS countries to compete economically with global powers. Nevertheless, the primary objective of the present endeavour does not lie in the pursuit of competition with the USA. Rather, it is



an attempt to diversify the country's foreign policy. In contrast, Türkiye has recently adopted a more pro-American stance in its own foreign policy.

Political and security relations within the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) are considerably more complex than its economic integration. The emphasis on economic cooperation stems from the underdeveloped state of political collaboration. In a global order shaped by neoliberalism, economic integration cannot be sustained without corresponding political alignment. Since its inception in 1992, the OTS has struggled to establish a coherent political framework. Türkiye's leadership role and its developmental advantage over Central Asian counterparts have fostered a "big brother" perception, undermining mutual trust. The lack of support for Azerbaijan following the First Karabakh War, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan's prolonged absence from summits, and declining diplomatic engagement reflect this fragility. Contributing factors include Türkiye's economic and security challenges, as well as the authoritarian tendencies of regional regimes. Militarily, the OTS remains ineffective; Kazakhstan's appeal to the CSTO during the 2022 unrest highlighted the organisation's inability to act as a security alliance. Even prior to military integration, the desired political unity had not materialised. A striking example is the recent adoption of an EU-aligned declaration by some CCA countries, recognising the Greek Cypriot Administration while sidelining the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and implicitly portraying Türkiye as an occupier. Although institutional progress and Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War represent positive developments, the latter resulted largely from Azerbaijan's bilateral alliance with Türkiye, with minimal support from other OTS members. The indifference of certain CCA states to the Cyprus issue—central to Türkiye's security concerns for decades—further illustrates the weakness of political integration. This disillusionment, however, is not solely the fault of other member states; Türkiye must also reconsider its policies. For instance, in the case of East Turkestan, neither Türkiye, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, nor any other OTS member has dared to openly confront China's repressive policies. Despite their ethnic ties with the Uyghurs, these states remain silent in the face of China's coercive diplomacy and human rights violations.

Ultimately, the OTS requires further economic integration and has yet to develop a true political union. The differing objectives of its member states, the perception of the OTS as a secondary organisation compared to others, and the focus on short-term national interests rather than the long-term stability and interests of Turkic societies hinder the OTS from becoming a regional actor. In accordance with the precepts of neo-realist theory, this scenario is indicative of regional hegemonies in the face of global powers. In the case of the OTS, this was Türkiye during its founding process in the early 1990s, and today it is Türkiye to the west of the Caspian Sea and Kazakhstan to the east. This situation is analogous to the classical division of Eastern and Western Khanates in historical Turkish states. Indeed, rather than considering the OTS in its totality, it is more logical to divide it into two distinct regions: Turkestan and the Caucasus-Black Sea area. Additionally, economic unity alone is insufficient; political and security cooperation must complement the economic framework, which the OTS has not yet achieved. While the Ukraine War temporarily positioned the OTS as an emerging actor, the Cyprus issue exposed its limitations. The states of the Turkic world demonstrate this through their own national interests and the relationships they have established with global powers.



Russia's diminishing influence, Türkiye's transition towards a policy aligned with that of the United States, Azerbaijan's relationship with Israel, and the desire of Kazakhstan and other states east of the Caspian Sea to benefit from EU assistance are all significant factors that must be taken into consideration. It can be posited that the CCA states prioritise their own interests over those of the OTS in their dealings with global actors, and that the OTS is regarded as a mechanism for regulating relations among themselves. The OTS's ability to navigate the challenges posed by Trump's policies towards China will be a crucial test, determining whether it can establish itself as a regional actor.

References

- Aghjeh, A. E. (2022, 29th October). "Why China fears the emerging Turkic alliance". *The National Interest*. From <https://www.nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/why-china-fears-emerging-turkic-alliance-205615>
- Alaranta, T. & Silvan, K. (2022). Türkiye in Central Asia: Possibilities and Limits of a Greater Role. *Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) Briefing Paper* 328.
- Anadolu Ajansı (2022, 14 December). Azerbaycan Cumhurbaşkanı Aliyev: Zengezur Koridoru 2024'te tamamlanacak ve yeni nakliyat koridoru oluşturulacak, from <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/azerbaycan-cumhurbaskani-aliyevzengezur-koridoru-2024te-tamamlanacak-ve-yeni-nakliyat-koridoruolusturulacak/2763617>, 27.04.2025
- Anceschi, L., & Grigoryan, A. (2022). Russia's relations with its regional allies since 24th February 2022. *Russian Analytical Digest (RAD)* 289. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000583559>
- Arı, T. (2010). Orta Asya'da Siyasal, Toplumsal ve Ekonomik Yapılar, Güvenlik Sorunları ve İş birliği Girişimleri. In Tayyar Arı (eds), *Orta Asya ve Kafkasya*, Bursa: MKM Yayıncılık: 13-41.
- Asia24.media. (2024, 12th August). *About rats and ships: "Central Asian defense union" smells of the British pound and Manilovism*, from <https://asia24.media/main/o-krysakh-i-korablyakh-oboronnyy-soyuz-tsentralnoy-azii-pakhnet-britanskim-funtom-i-manilovshchinoy/, 12.08.2024>.
- Asma, Y., & Koca, M. E. (2021, 6th May). *Avrupa'nın Orta Asya stratejisi*. İNSAMER.
- Ayata, A. (2010). Türkiye'nin Orta Asya Politikası. In M. C. Yenigün & E. Efegil (Eds), *Türkiye'nin değişen Dış Politikası*. Nobel Yayınevi.
- Aydın, M. (2010). Kafkasya ve Orta Asya ile İlişkiler. In B. Oran (Ed.), *Türk Dış Politikası Cilt II 1980-2001*. İletişim Yayınevi.
- Aydın, M. E., & Liui, Y. (2024). Organisation of Turkic states: diverse motivations for a common aim. *SİYASAL: Journal of Political Sciences*, 33(1), 35-54. <http://doi.org/10.26650/siyasal.2024.33.1363769>.
- Baghirov, O. (2022). The Organisation of Turkic States' Economic Potential and Cooperation Prospects among its Members. *Perceptions*, 27(1), 53-73.



Baki, P. M. (2022). Türk Dünyası 2040 Vizyon Belgesi ve Türk İş Birliğinin Artan Jeostratejik Önemi. *Kriter*, 7(73), from <https://kriterdergi.com/dosya-turk-devletleri-teskilati/turk-dunyasi-2040-vizyon-belgesi-ve-turk-is-birliginin-artan-jeostratejik-onemi>, 21.01.2025.

Buzan, B. & Wæver, O. (2003). *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge University Press.

Bölükbaşı, Y. Z. (2023). Cumhuriyetin Yeni Yüzyılında Dış Politikada Türk Dünyası Vizyonu. *Akademik Hassasiyetler*, 10(23), 469-495. <https://doi.org/10.58884/akademik-hassasiyetler.1356851>

Brzezinski, Z. (2021). *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*. Moscow: ACT.

Clarke, M. E. (2013). *Xinjiang and China's Rise in Central Asia - A History*. Routledge.

Cumhuriyet. (2025). *Kırgızistan'da çarşaf, burka tebliğ faaliyetleri ve dinin siyasete*, from <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/dunya/kirgizistanda-carsaf-burka-teblig-faaliyetleri-ve-dinin-siyasete-2295878>. 12.04.2025

DEİK. (2022, February). *Özbekistan Bilgi Notu*. Dış Ekonomik İlişkiler Kurulu, from <https://www.deik.org.tr/uploads/ozbekistan-bilgi-notu-subat-22-3.pdf>, 27.04.2025.

Dugin, A. (2014). *Rus Jeopolitiği Avrasyacı Yaklaşım*. Küre Yayınları.

Duran, B. (2023, 7th November). In Astana, a new step toward integration. *Daily Sabah*, from <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/in-astana-a-new-step-toward-integration>, 07.04.2025.

Euronews. (2018, 12 August). *Hazar Denizi'nin statüsü 20 yıllık müzakereler sonunda belli oldu*, from <https://tr.euronews.com/2018/08/12/hazar-denizi-nin-statusu-20-yillik-muzakereler-sonunda-belli-oldu>, 22.04.2025

Faulkner, N. (2021). *Marksist Dünya Tarihi Neandertallerden Neoliberallere*. Çev. Tuncel Öncel ve Şükrü Alpagut, Yordam Kitap.

Furlong, R., Kaviani, H., & Vidishiqli, A. (2025, 26th March). *Five areas where Türkiye plays a key role in world affairs*. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, from <https://www.rferl.org/a/Türkiye-foreign-policy-global-relations-erdogan-imamoglu/33358741.html>, 26.03.2025.

Güller, M. A. (2025, 7th April). 12 milyar avroya KKTC'yi sattılar. *Cumhuriyet*, from <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/mehmet-ali-guller/12-milyar-avroya-kktcyi-sattilar-2316383>, 07.04.2025

Holland, S. (2025, 7th August). "U.S. secures strategic transit corridor in Armenia-Azerbaijan peace deal" *Reuters*. From <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-secures-strategic-transit-corridor-armenia-azerbaijan-peace-deal-2025-08-07/>

Hopkirk, P. (2022). *Büyük Oyun-Orta Asya'da Gizli Savaş*. Çev. Renan Akman, Türkiye İş Bankası Yayınları.



- International Energy Agency. (n.d.). *Azerbaijan energy profile: Energy security*, from <https://www.iea.org/reports/azerbaijan-energy-profile/energy-security>, 27.04.2025.
- İstikbal, D. (2021). Türk Dünyasında Ekonomik İş Birliği. *Kriter*, 6(62), from <https://kriterdergi.com/dosya-turk-devletleri-teskilati/turk-dunyasinda-ekonomik-is-birligi>, 09.01. 2025.
- İşeri, E. (2009). The US Grand Strategy and the Eurasian heartland in the twenty-first century. *Geopolitics*, 14(1), 26-46, DOI: 10.1080/14650040802578658.
- Kamilov, A. (2024, 14th August). *Uzbekistan bears special responsibility for the future of Central Asia*. The Tashkent Times, from <https://www.tashkenttimes.uz/national/13522-uzbekistan-bears-special-responsibility-for-the-future-of-central-asia-president-s-envoy-for-foreign-policy-course-abdulaziz-kamilov>, 20.03.2025.
- Karaveli, H (2024, 11th April). Türkiye and the Organisation of Turkic States: A Quest for Pan-Turkism?, *The Central Asia-Caucasus*. <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13797-Türkiye-and-the-organization-of-turkic-states-a-quest-for-pan-turkism?.html>, 19.03.2025.
- Karpat, K. H. (2012). *Türk Dış Politikası Tarihi*. Timaş Yayınları.
- Kireççi, M. A. (2011). *Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin Orta Asya politikaları*. In M. Yılmaz (Ed.). Ankara: Hoca Ahmet Yesevi Uluslararası Türk-Kazak Üniversitesi.
- Kocaman, Ö. (2022). Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı: Stratejik Bir Bakış. *Kriter*, 7(73), from <https://kriterdergi.com/dosya-turk-devletleri-teskilati/turk-devletleri-teskilati-stratejik-bir-bakis>, 11.02.2025.
- Koçak, M. (2023). Potential of Organisation of Turkic States in the International System: Promises and Vulnerabilities. *Insight Türkiye*, 25(4), 115-137, DOI: 10.25253/99.2023254.8.
- Kürkçü, B. (2019). *Decision-making process in Turkish foreign policy crises: The role of state institutions during Süleyman Demirel administrations* (Doctoral dissertation). Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Türkiye.
- Leedy, P. D. & Ormrod, J. E. (2015). *Practical Research: Planning and Design*. London: Pearson.
- Mai, J. (2021, 26th December). "Revamped Turkic states group 'adds to extreme uncertainty' at China's door". *South China Morning Post*. From scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3161085/revamped-turkic-states-group-adds-extreme-uncertainty-chinas
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan. (2024, 14th September). *Renaissance of Central Asia: Towards sustainable development and prosperity*, from <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa-unesco/press/news/details/824213>, 12.03.2025
- Mustofaev, M. (2022). The Organisation of Turkic States: A New Approach to Global and Regional Challenges. *Perceptions*, 27(1), 105-120.



Nurgaliyeva, L. (2016). Kazakhstan's economic soft balancing policy vis-à-vis Russia: From the Eurasian Union to the economic cooperation with Türkiye. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 7(2), 92–105.

Omeliicheva, M. Y., & Du, R. (2018). Kazakhstan's multi-vectorism and Sino-Russian relations. *Insight Türkiye*, 20(4), 95–110.

Ongun, Y. (2022, 16 November). "Türk Devletleri Zirvesi: Türkiye'nin rolü ve Rusya'nın tavrı". *Yetkin Report*. From <https://www.yetkinreport.com/2022/11/16/turk-devletleri-zirvesi-turkiyenin-rolu-ve-rusyanin-tavri/>

Pannier, B. (2024, 22nd December). *What will Trump's policy be toward Central Asia?* Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, from <https://about.rferl.org/article/what-will-trumps-policy-be-toward-central-asia/>, 18.04.2025.

RFE/RL. (2024, 27th December). *Global forecast 2025: Outlook for a world of change*, from <https://www.rferl.org/a/global-forecast-2025-world-outlook-change/33250119.html>, 20.03.2025.

RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service. (2024, 3rd October). *Turkic states agree on common Latin alphabet, but Kyrgyzstan happy with its Cyrillic script*. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, from <https://www.rferl.org/a/common-turkic-alphabet-kyrgyz-kazakh-uzbek-turkmen-latin-cyrillic/33137392.html>, 18.03.2025.

Ryzhko, K., & Sabirova, Z. (2025, 20th August). "Stability brings profits: How the Armenian-Azerbaijan peace deal could transform the region's economy". *Caspian Policy Centre*. From <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/economy/stability-brings-profits-how-the-armenian-azerbaijan-peace-deal-could-transform-the-regions-economy>

Rickleton, C. (2024a, 16th August). *Sans Russia: What's behind Kazakh president's call for Central Asian security cooperation?* Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, from <https://www.rferl.org/a/central-asia-security-without-russia/33080927.html>, 21.03.2025.

Rickleton, C. (2024b, 24th October). *Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan resist Russia's coalition-building in 'sovereignty test'*. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, from <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-uzbekistan-russia-coalition-sovereignty/33170505.html>, 22.04.2025.

Rickleton, C. (2024c, 24th June). *Chinese Megaprojects Back in Fashion in Central Asia's Poorest States*. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, from <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-megaprojects-central-asia-belt-road/33007345.html>, 18.03.2025.

Sander, O. (2006). *Türkiye'nin Dış Politikası*. İmge Kitabevi.

Sarıkaya, Y. (2021). Türk Dünyasında Örgütlenme ve Bütünleşme Süreci. *Kriter*, 6(62), from <https://kriterdergi.com/dosya-turk-devletleri-teskilati/turk-dunyasinda-orgutlenme-ve-butunlesme-sureci>, 11.02.2025.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.



Standish, R. (2025, 26th February). *China in Eurasia briefing: Is there a new opening in Europe for China?* Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, from <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-eu-india-ukraine-tension-kissinger-nixon-xi-putin/33328544.html>, 18.03.2025.

Swanström, N. (2011). *China and Greater Central Asia: New Frontiers*. Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program.

Taşağı, A. (2018). *Bozkırın Kağanlıkları: Hunlar, Tabgaçlar, Göktürkler, Uygurlar*. İstanbul: Kronik Yayınları.

The Wall Street Journal. (2025, 14th February). *Transcript of WSJ interview with JD Vance*, from <https://www.wsj.com/politics/transcript-of-wsj-interview-with-jd-vance-f76a6ff4>, 24.03.2025.

Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı. Teşkilatın Tarihçesi, from <https://www.turkicstates.org/tr/organizasyon-tarihcesi>, 25.04.2025.

Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı. Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı 8. Zirvesi İstanbul Bildirisi, from <https://www.turkicstates.org/tr/haber/turk-devletleri-teskilati-8-zirvesi-istanbul-bildirisi>, 26.05.2025.

Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı. (2022). *Semerkant bildirisi*, from <https://www.turkicstates.org/u/d/haberler/semerkant-bildirisi-2679-164.pdf>, 27.05.2025.

Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı. Tarihçe, from <https://tika.gov.tr/kurumumuz/tarihce/>, 27.04.2025.

Waltz, K. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. McGraw-Hill: Massachusetts.

Worldometer. (n.d.). *Azerbaijan oil*, from <https://www.worldometers.info/oil/azerbaijan-oil/>, 24.05.2025

Yalçın, A. Z., & Dogan, M. (2023). Enerjide Dışa Bağımlılık Sorunu: Türkiye İçin Ampirik Bir Analiz. *Yönetim ve Ekonomi Dergisi*, 30(2), 203-223. <https://doi.org/10.18657/yonveek.1206158>

Yalçinkaya, F. (2013). Türkiye ve Orta Asya Ülkeleri Arasındaki Siyasi ve Diplomatik İlişkiler-Hükümetler Üstü Kuruluşlar (1992-2012). In F. Türk (Ed.), *Türk Dış Politikasında Orta Asya ve Ortadoğu 1990'lerden Günümüze*. Paradigma Akademi Yayınları.

Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Sage.

Yujin, F (2019). China's strategy toward Central Asia: interests, principles and policy tools. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University International Relations*, vol. 12, issue 1, pp. 23-39. <https://doi.org/10.21638/11701/spbu06.2019.102>

Zabortseva, Y. N. (2012). From the "Forgotten region" to the "great game" region: On the development of geopolitics in Central Asia. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 3, 168-176, doi:10.1016/j.euras.2012.03.007.



THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP DISCOURSES IN THE ONTOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE ORGANISATION OF TURKIC STATES AS A REGIONAL POWER

KÜRŞAD GÜÇ

kursad.guc@gmail.com

Assistant Professor, Gendarmerie and Coast Guard Academy (Türkiye), Department of
International Security and Terrorism. ORCID: 0000-0003-2007-9580

Abstract

This study examines the influence of the discourses of member state leaders on the ontological construction of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) as both a political and social entity. While the OTS is an international organisation that prioritises cooperation among Turkic-speaking states by emphasising political, economic, cultural, and social dimensions, it is simultaneously in the process of constructing its own identity. Accordingly, the OTS is not merely a political formation but also seeks to establish itself within the international system with a distinctive identity rooted in a shared past, language, and culture, projected into the present and the future. In this respect, the discourses of leaders are significant as they reveal how the OTS positions itself within rapidly changing social spheres of the international system. Therefore, this study employs discourse analysis and content analysis methods to demonstrate how the political leaders' statements of the OTS member states contribute to shaping the organisation's ontological construction.

Keywords

Organisation of Turkic States, Turkic World, International Organisation, Ontological Construction, Discourse.

Resumo

Este estudo analisa a influência dos discursos dos líderes dos Estados-membros na construção ontológica da Organização dos Estados Turcos (OTS) como entidade política e social. Embora a OTS seja uma organização internacional que prioriza a cooperação entre os Estados de língua turca, enfatizando as dimensões política, económica, cultural e social, ela está simultaneamente em processo de construção da sua própria identidade. Assim, a OTS não é apenas uma formação política, mas também procura estabelecer-se no sistema internacional com uma identidade distinta, enraizada num passado, língua e cultura comuns, projetados no presente e no futuro. Nesse sentido, os discursos dos líderes são significativos, pois revelam como a OTS se posiciona dentro das esferas sociais em rápida mudança do sistema internacional. Portanto, este estudo emprega métodos de análise de discurso e análise de conteúdo para demonstrar como as declarações dos líderes políticos dos Estados-membros da OTS contribuem para moldar a construção ontológica da organização.



Palavras-chave

Organização dos Estados Turcos, Mundo Turco, Organização Internacional, Construção Ontológica, Discurso.

How to cite this article

Güç, Kürşad (2025). The Role of Leadership Discourses in The Ontological Construction of the Organisation of Turkic States as a Regional Power. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 411-433. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.22>

Article submitted on 29th May 2025 and accepted for publication on 02nd September 2025.





THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP DISCOURSES IN THE ONTOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE ORGANISATION OF TURKIC STATES AS A REGIONAL POWER

KÜRŞAD GÜÇ

Introduction

This study focuses on the discourses of the leaders of member states in the process of shaping the identity of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) as an international organisation. It examines how references to shared history, culture, language, and identity contribute to the ontological construction of the OTS and its positioning within the international system. In this regard, leaders' public statements, summit declarations, and official communiqués are analysed through the combined use of discourse analysis and content analysis.

Discourse analysis, which rests on the claim that social reality is constructed through language and discourse -and that behind this reality lie identity narratives highlighted by political elites- functions as a method that makes such realities visible (Gee, 2011; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Content analysis, in turn, seeks to identify structures, themes, and patterns across selected texts, including discourses (Krippendorff, 2013). Accordingly, by applying both approaches, this study aims to reveal not only the link between identity narratives and political elites in the construction of the OTS as a social organism, but also the recurring themes, frameworks, and patterns embedded in these narratives.

Within the discipline of international relations, scholarship rooted in social constructivism emphasises that social realities are not given; rather, the identities, interests, and actions of actors are constructed through recurring practices and discourses and are continuously reconstructed over time (Wendt, 1999; Onuf, 1989; Kratochwil, 1989). In this framework, the concept of "ontological construction" refers particularly to the processes through which collective identities are formed and the reasons for actors' existence in the world are discursively articulated. From this perspective, the OTS is not only established as a functional platform from institutional, legal, and political standpoints, but it is also subject to processes of "ontological construction" that seek to assign it a meaningful rationale for existence. The statements of member state leaders - emphasising historical continuity, shared memory, and collective values- play a critical role in defining "who" the OTS is. In doing so, these discourses support the construction of the organisation as a distinctive actor within the international system. Ontological construction, therefore, allows the OTS to be understood not only as an institutional framework but also as a site of identity formation and existential grounding.



For any actor (individual, state, or organisation) to perceive itself as an entity, it must first experience a sense of continuity within a historical space. The construction of a linear existential trajectory between the past, present, and future is made possible through biographical narratives. From the accumulated realities of the past, certain elements are selectively transferred to the present and projected into the future. In this way, the actor is portrayed - both to itself and to others - not as an arbitrary or momentary presence, but as an entity possessing historical continuity. The biographical narrative used in constructing such historical continuity is made manifest through the discourses of the actor itself or the elite that constitute the actor.

The formation of collective identity through ontological construction is not exclusive to the Organisation of Turkic States. Similar patterns have been documented in other regional and international organisations, where identity emerges alongside functional cooperation. The European Union, for example, has been widely explored as a case in which a shared European identity is fostered through institutional narratives that emphasise common history, values, and aspirations (Risse, 2010). In a similar vein, ASEAN has cultivated an "ASEAN identity" or promoted "Asian values" through summit declarations and diplomatic rhetoric (Acharya, 2014). Building on these examples, international organisations with a distinct cultural and identity-based background emerge not only as arenas of functional practice but also as platforms where existential dynamics are ontologically constructed. In this sense, analysing the OTS within the framework of ontological construction, particularly given its foundations in shared history and cultural dynamics, holds significant theoretical value.

Considering the Organisation of Turkic States' (OTS) growing influence in recent years, the organisation has articulated a bold vision not only through its institutional mechanisms but also in cultural terms. Therefore, identifying the direction and purposes of the OTS's identity construction is meaningful not only for analysing the organisation per se, but also for understanding how it positions itself within the international system. Although recent academic studies on the OTS have largely focused on its historical development, institutional structure, and political, social, and economic potential, research addressing its social construction remains scarce. Moreover, no existing study has directly examined the discourses of leaders as part of this social construction process.

The existing literature on the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) has primarily been shaped around themes such as regional geopolitical cooperation (Gündoğdu, 2023; Emeklier, Taş & Yılmaz, 2022), political and economic potential (Aydilek, 2022; Çınar & Uzun, 2022; Korkmaz & Soğukoğlu Korkmaz, 2024), historical development and integration processes (Akçapa, 2023; Tekir, 2023; Uzunağaç, 2025; Altymyshova & Omurova, 2025), and legal-institutional frameworks within the broader context of international organisations (Erkiner & Eray, 2022; Jane, 2025). However, the constitutive role of leadership discourses in the collective identity construction of the OTS has not been sufficiently explored. Although a few discourse-oriented studies exist, most research tends to assess the OTS through its functional dimensions (see Özsoy, 2023). This article seeks to address this gap by treating discourse not as a supplementary element, but as a central mechanism in the construction of institutional identity. In doing so, it offers an original perspective that positions discourse analysis at the core of



understanding the ontological formation of the OTS through the lens of leadership rhetoric.

At this point, the official statements issued by the organisation as an institution, along with the discourses produced by the leaders of its member states, have played a significant role in the ontological emergence of the OTS. As reflected in the leaders' discourses, the OTS is not a coincidental mechanism designed merely to address immediate practical needs in interstate relations. Rather, it aspires to be a meaningful socio-political entity rooted in historical continuity. In this sense, the OTS seeks not only to resolve political and economic issues and foster cooperation in these domains, but also to generate a shared sense of belonging around a specific historical identity. In this context, the leaders of the member states frequently emphasise common ties of history, culture, language, and faith, expressing that the organisation is not merely a coalition of interests but also a "civilisational family." These discourses contribute to the ontological (existential) construction of the organisation while simultaneously reinforcing its political legitimacy.

The dataset for this study is composed of speeches, official statements, and summit communiqués delivered by the heads of state from the member countries of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) between 2019 and 2024. This timeframe was chosen deliberately to focus on the post-rebranding phase of the organisation -from the Turkic Council to the OTS-and to examine how this institutional shift was reflected discursively. A purposive sampling method was employed, prioritising speeches that clearly reference notions of shared history, cultural ties, linguistic unity, identity, and forward-looking visions. Each speech or relevant textual segment containing expressions of collective identity was treated as a unit of analysis. The coding process followed an inductive logic: initial open coding helped identify recurring themes and symbolic patterns, which were then organised through axial coding into four central categories - historical continuity, spatial belonging, cultural and linguistic commonality, and future vision. Grounded in the principles of critical discourse analysis, this coding approach enabled the study to explore the ways in which language contributes to the formation and projection of institutional identity.

Accordingly, the first part of the study presents the theoretical framework regarding how collective identity is constructed through discourse. Within this framework, the study elaborates on key concepts such as historical narratives, collective memory, and political myths, based on the understanding that identity construction is not fixed but continuously reproduced through discursive practices. The second part focuses on the discourses of leaders in the context of the OTS, categorising them under four main themes: historical continuity, spatial belonging, cultural unity, and future vision. It then evaluates the contribution of these discourses to the construction of the organisation's institutional identity. In the conclusion, the study discusses how these discourses shape the ontological existence of the organisation in light of the findings and offers a general assessment.



The Ontological Construction of Collective Identity and Discourse

Collective identities are not fixed or natural entities; rather, they are constructs that are formed through discourse within social processes (Hülse, 2006: 396; Slocum-Bradley, 2010: 51). This approach asserts that identity is essentially a socially constructed practice, continuously reproduced through language, metaphors, narratives, and historical memory. According to Hülse (2006: 397), metaphors do not merely reflect existing realities but also create new social realities. Slocum-Bradley (2010: 55-57) emphasises that identities are dynamically positioned through narrative structures and discursive acts. While narratives assign specific roles to individuals and groups, discursive acts enable these roles to gain visibility within social reality. Therefore, the process of identity construction is not static but is constantly reshaped through discursive interventions.

Historical narratives play a central role in the construction of collective identity. According to Schmidtke (2023: 3), community identities are formed through collective memory by generating a shared perception of the past and a belief in the continuity of this sharedness into the future. This understanding allows individuals to perceive themselves as part of a broader political and cultural community, thereby reinforcing elements of collective identity such as solidarity and loyalty.

This shared world of meaning fosters a sense of “we” within the community, enabling individuals to feel a sense of belonging to a collective identity. Common narratives provide guidance about who individuals are, where they come from, and what values they embody. These narratives generate emotional bonds and a shared cultural memory within the community. In this way, identity emerges not merely as the sum of individual experiences but as a social construct shaped around meaningful stories and shared values. Historical narratives not only serve to remember the past but also reinterpret it, imbuing it with new meanings that serve today’s identity constructions (Bilgin, 2013: 26).

As Christoffer Kølvrå (2015: 62-63) argues, identity is not shaped by the linear transmission of historical events, but rather through the selection and interpretation of events within the framework of narratives. Unlike the discipline of history, collective memory does not claim objectivity; instead, it is organised through mythical structures that serve the present needs of the community. Similarly, Olick and Robbins (1998) assert that collective memory is not merely about remembering the past but is closely related to the structures of meaning that shape community identity.

In this context, Paul Ricoeur’s (1984: 64-71) theory of narrative time argues that the narratives of elites bring the past together in a coherent and meaningful way. These narratives go beyond providing a chronological account of past events; they construct a historical consciousness that unites individuals or actors around a shared past, values, and goals, thereby fostering a collective will. Through such narratives, societies achieve social cohesion by reinforcing belief in the historical continuity of their social structures. In this way, the past not only shapes the present and the future but also lends legitimacy to these processes.



Collective memory, in this sense, is not simply a collection of personal recollections. It is a socially constructed phenomenon. As Misztal (2003) argues, memory serves not only as a record of collective experiences but also as a framework of meaning that sustains group identity and cohesion. Through shared symbols, emotions, and references to the past, collective memory shapes what a community values, what it chooses to remember, and how it defines itself across generations.

Importantly, past events are not remembered neutrally - they are reinterpreted in ways that align with the community's current moral and existential concerns. This dynamic process of reconfiguration demonstrates that memory is not fixed; rather, it evolves in response to cultural and political needs. From a Kierkegaardian perspective (1985: 12-14), memory acts as "recollection," not in the sense of passive recall, but as a deeply emotional and moral re-engagement with the past that generates new meaning (Kølvraa, 2015: 69-71).

Ines Gabel (2013: 250-251) also underscores that collective memory is inherently ideological. The process of remembering - which events are highlighted, how they are interpreted, and why they are passed on - reflects the power structures, value systems, and identity needs of the present moment. In this context, collective memory functions as a tool that serves the interests of specific actors and reproduces group identity. Memory thus becomes not merely a reflection of the past, but an ideological space that shapes the social imagination of both the present and the future. To build a meaningful future, the past is internalised by being reinterpreted through the lens of a hoped-for future - a process that Giddens (2014: 104) describes as the re-evaluation of the past in light of the future. The transmission of the past becomes the foundation for the future, resulting in what Giddens (2014: 117) refers to as the "colonisation of the future."

Similarly, Motzafi-Haller (1994: 417-418) underscores the foundational role of historical narratives in identity construction. These narratives not only convey the past but also play a key role in clarifying group belonging and differentiation. According to Motzafi-Haller, historical narratives also determine how a community spatially situates itself; in other words, identity construction is not solely a temporal but also a spatial process. In this framework, historical narratives draw social boundaries by linking group identity to spatial references, defining the inside and the outside, and thus shaping the community's perception of "us" and "the other" (Motzafi-Haller, 1994: 420-423).

Bikmen (2015: 310-312), who investigates the impact of historical narratives on group performance, draws particular attention to the positive influence of themes such as collective victory and resistance on individual motivation. Such narratives enable individuals to perceive their roles and positions within the group as more meaningful and valuable. Themes that resonate within collective memory - such as resistance, victimhood, or heroism - strengthen solidarity and the sense of belonging among group members.

The impact of these narratives is not limited to individual motivation; they also enhance the group's capacity for collective action and internal cohesion. Symbolic events from a shared past become foundational justifications for the group's present political and cultural stance. In this context, historical narratives create a framework for future unity by recalling how past hardships were overcome and how the group maintained its



cohesion. These narratives reinforce the belief that the group is capable of collective action not only in the past but also in the future, thereby sustaining the continuity of collective identity.

As Olivier Schmitt (2018: 488-489) points out, strategic narratives are only effective if they resonate with existing political myths. The myths produced by political elites are narratives that bring communities together and ensure the continuity of these shared identities, rendering past experiences meaningful for the present (Schmitt, 2018: 490-491). These narratives, which selectively shape communities' perceptions of the past and construct a shared historical consciousness, are, according to Bell (2003), influential both in the formation and legitimation of collective identities. Thus, political and social myths do not merely facilitate the remembrance of the past but also transmit the system of values derived from historical experiences into the present. Moreover, myths that highlight what has occurred in the past also indicate the cultural and political foundations upon which the present and future can be constructed (Schmitt, 2018: 491-492). Building on Bell and Schmitt, discourses that foreground political and historical myths become effective mechanisms in the construction of collective identity.

The role of elites -particularly political elites- is crucial in the selective transmission of historical narratives and myths from the social memory of communities into the present. The remembrance of the past is not a passive or spontaneous process. On the contrary, these myths are actively promoted by political elites as tools for addressing current societal challenges and constructing a meaningful future. In this sense, political myths possess a constitutive and ideological dimension. As such, this process not only enables communities to establish a link with their past but also unites them around shared values and goals, fostering the creation of a collective sense of "We."

The meanings attributed to past experiences strengthen collective belonging and provide a foundation for projecting this identity into the future. From this perspective, identity construction is not limited to recalling the past; it is also a forward-looking strategic practice. It determines how political communities imagine their future, define their aims, and construct a shared vision. Identity, therefore, emerges not simply as a narrative of the past but as a performative discourse that directs the future.

Ontological Construction through Discourse in the Organisation of Turkic States

The disintegration of the Soviet Union paved the way for the Turkic states to come together under Türkiye's leadership, leading to the establishment of the Summit of Heads of State of Turkic-Speaking Countries in 1992. This summit laid the institutional foundations of what would later become the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS). Initially designed to foster friendship and cooperation among Turkic-speaking countries, the summit gradually expanded its scope to include economic and cultural collaboration. With the signing of the Nakhchivan Agreement in 2009, the platform acquired the structure of an international organisation under the name "Turkic Council," and in 2021, it was renamed as the Organisation of Turkic States.



The transformation of the OTS from a leaders' summit into an international organisation reflects not merely institutional evolution, but also the effort to consolidate and institutionalise a collective identity rooted in a shared civilisational legacy. Member state leaders have frequently described this unity as a family bond grounded in common ancestry and a strong cultural heritage. This perspective positions the organisation not simply as a technical intergovernmental mechanism but as a custodian of collective memory and identity. In other words, this approach aligns with Anderson's (1991) conceptualisation of "imagined communities," whereby geographically distant groups of people are brought together through shared narratives and identities.

From this perspective, the OTS not only seeks to recall a common past and unite communities across different geographies but also aspires to build a shared future through a strategic vision. Expressions frequently appearing in institutional documents and leaders' discourses, such as "shared history," "walking together into the future," and "civilisational roots," demonstrate the organisation's promotion of an inclusive Turkic identity that transcends the national identities of its member states.

In the sections that follow, the construction of the institutional and collective identity of the OTS through leadership discourse will be examined under four main themes. First, the identity formation grounded in historical continuity and common origins will be discussed. Second, the narratives of spatial belonging articulated through specific cities and regions will be analysed. Third, the construction of collective identity and future projection along the axis of shared language and cultural unity will be presented. Finally, the role of future-oriented visions and the OTS's search for international influence, as expressed in leadership discourse, will be evaluated in terms of their contribution to identity production.

Historical Continuity and Common Origins

In the ontological construction of the OTS, one of the central themes emphasised in the discourses of member state leaders is the notion of shared historical origins among the states and communities that constitute the Turkic World. The idea that the OTS is not a conventionally formed organisation designed to meet specific political, social, economic, environmental, or military needs, but rather a natural - even inevitable - entity emerging through the pendulum of history is evident in their frequent references to a common past. In this context, the statements of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan hold a significant place in shaping the identity of the OTS within a shared historical consciousness of the Turkic World. Erdoğan has described the Turkic World as "brothers nourished by the same spiritual heritage, sharing a common past, culture, and ancestors," and declared, "We will exert all our efforts to make the coming period the Century of the Turkic World" (Anadolu Agency, November 7, 2024), demonstrating a strong will to carry this historical continuity into the future. President Erdoğan's statement constructs not only a narrative of historical and cultural unity but also actively produces a sense of collective "we" identity. His emphasis on "the same spiritual heritage," "common past," and "brotherhood" implies the continuation of a long-standing unity into the present. By invoking collective memory, the discourse creates an emotional connection and serves to legitimise the ontological continuity of the Organisation of Turkic States. Such



statements evolve into political myths in the sense described by Bell (2003), contributing to the reconstruction of Turkic identity on the basis of historical continuity. They also serve to update collective memory, turning the past into a resource for today's identity and tomorrow's vision.

Another notable statement by Erdoğan further illustrates this narrative: "God willing, the time is near when the sun will once again rise from the East. The Turkestan region, which for thousands of years has been the cradle of civilisation, will once again become a centre of attraction and enlightenment for all humanity" (Milliyet, November 13, 2021). This metaphorical expression, invoking the image of the sun rising again from the East, implies a return to historical roots and suggests that this return will bring about a universal awakening. Such discourse aligns with Ricoeur's (1984: 64-71) theory of narrative time, reconstructing past events in a way that grants meaning to contemporary political identity. At the same time, it constructs a mythical narrative that positions Turkestan not merely as a geographical location but as a foundational space of civilisation.

This historical vision is also reflected in the recent summit declarations of the OTS, which emphasise "civilisation-based cooperation." The strategic language of institutional documents advancing in harmony with leadership discourse indicates that discourse directly contributes to the organisation's institutional identity formation process.

In this context, the remarks of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev during the 2022 Summit of the Organisation of Turkic States held in Samarkand are particularly noteworthy: "*The Turkic world has an awe-inspiring great history, great ancestors, and a unique richness. And I believe that the Turkic world has a great future. We will build this future together with our hardworking, generous, and noble people*" (uzbekistan.org.ua, November 11, 2022). This statement reflects Mirziyoyev's respect for the past of the Turkic world and his aspiration to construct a common vision for the future. This also highlights that the Organisation of Turkic States is not solely rooted in historical connections, but is equally shaped by common aspirations and values. In his statements, President Mirziyoyev underscores the importance of building a shared identity and collective future for the Turkic world, reflecting how this vision is actively supported at the highest political level. Such leadership narratives do more than express goodwill - they play a vital role in reinforcing the OTS's institutional identity and in fostering a deeper, more cohesive collaboration among its member nations. It is evident that such narratives play a crucial role in reinforcing the historical legitimacy of the organisation.

A similar approach is articulated by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, who has emphasised that the OTS represents not only a political union but also one of identity. While underlining the priority of the organisation in the international arena, Aliyev described the Turkic world as a large family to which its members belong (Aliyev, February 14, 2024). His emphasis on "family" highlights the unity of ancestry, culture, and history among the Turkic states. According to Aliyev: "*This unity is natural; it is rooted in common origins. Therefore, this unity is stronger than all others. Our unity is based on ethnic and cultural roots*" (Anadolu Agency, June 6, 2024). In this discourse, identity is presented - through what Slocum-Bradley (2010) refers to as a discursive act



- as a natural, immutable, and historically given reality, thereby legitimising political unity within a historical and cultural framework. Aliyev's discourse provides an answer to the question "Who are we?" in both historical and contemporary terms, thus reinforcing the institutional identity of the organisation.

Kazakhstan's founding leader and the intellectual architect of the OTS, Nursultan Nazarbayev, particularly emphasised the shared historical identity of Turkic peoples during the period when he proposed the establishment of the Turkic Council (now the OTS). In his essay *"The Seven Facets of the Great Steppe,"* Nazarbayev underscored the common origins and cultural heritage of the Turkic peoples (Kozyrev, 2019). According to Nazarbayev, the OTS is "not a new bloc" but rather a sign that "Turkic civilisation is beginning to revive" (TRT Avaz, November 12, 2021). Through this discourse, Nazarbayev conveyed that the OTS should not merely function as a platform for cooperation but should also emerge as a cultural revival movement grounded in historical roots.

Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev also explicitly expressed themes of identity and belonging within the Turkic world following Uzbekistan's accession to the OTS. In his speech at the Samarkand Summit, he stated: *"Our Turkic world has an enviable great history, great ancestors, and a unique richness, and I believe that a magnificent future awaits the Turkic world. This summit in the ancient city of Samarkand will mark a new stage of growth in the history of the Turkic world"* (Aridemir, 2022: 131). Mirziyoyev's statements illustrate how the historical past of the Turkic peoples contributes to contemporary unity and reinforces the role of the OTS in this process. His characterisation of the organisation as a new phase in Turkic history reveals a framework that emphasises historical continuity within the biographical narrative of the OTS.

Hungarian President Viktor Orbán, whose country holds observer status in the OTS, has also made favourable remarks regarding the identity and cultural roots of the Turkic world. He declared: *"The Hungarian people are connected to the Turkic peoples by a historical and cultural heritage that stretches back centuries. In Europe, we were scorned as the barbaric Huns and the people of Attila. Yet, our people take pride in this historical legacy"* (BBC News Turkish, November 14, 2021). According to Orbán, the unity of the Turkic states is the result of historical continuity. Similarly, the President of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), Ersin Tatar - another observer member - emphasised that *"the unity of brotherly countries that share the same language, religion, culture, ancestry, and roots gives strength to the Turkic World,"* thus highlighting the OTS as a continuation of deep historical roots (TRNC Presidency, November 6, 2024).

Such leadership discourses do not merely construct a historical narrative; they also lay the ideological groundwork for that narrative. As Schmitt (2018) points out, strategic narratives become effective only when they resonate with existing political myths. In this context, the discourses of OTS leaders reinforce both internal solidarity and external legitimacy by keeping shared historical references alive. These discourses enhance the functionality of collective identity in terms of both emotional belonging and institutional orientation.

Thus, leadership discourses not only reinforce the power of historical narratives in constructing collective identity, but also imagine the Turkic World not merely as a legacy



of the past, but as a collective subject of the future. In this framework, history becomes not merely a story of the past, but a constitutive element in envisioning a shared future. This approach regards historical continuity not only as a mode of remembrance but as a strategic narrative architecture that ensures institutional continuity.

Spatial Emphasis and Shared Places

In the production of collective identity within the OTS, spatial representations function as powerful instruments of construction - no less significant than historical continuity. Certain cities and geographical regions are not merely geopolitical entities; they also serve as symbolic carriers of historical narrative. Place names become "sites of memory" laden with associations, thereby rendering the perception of common origin tangible for the community (Assmann, 2011). The emphasis on place in the discourse of OTS leaders reflects not only spatial belonging but also the attribution of historical meaning. In this regard, space is not merely a physical territory, but a symbolic dimension that represents collective memory and identity.

During the opening ceremony of the Informal Summit of OTS Leaders held in Shusha in 2024, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev stated: *"Today we are in Shusha, the Cultural Capital of the Turkic World. This is an event of great historical and spiritual significance. This decision demonstrates our unity"* (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, June 15, 2024). In the same speech, Aliyev highlighted the emotional significance of Shusha for the Turkic world, declaring: *"This unique city evokes a deep sense of respect and pride not only in the hearts of the Azerbaijani people but in those of all Turkic peoples"* (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, March 15, 2024). These statements demonstrate that Shusha is encoded as a cultural and historical centre not only for Azerbaijan but for the broader Turkic World. Aliyev's emphasis on "unity" generates a sense of identity and cultural solidarity through a spatial reference.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan similarly highlighted the cultural and symbolic significance of Shusha during his visit on June 15, 2021, stating: *"I believe the messages we convey from Shusha, Azerbaijan's cultural capital that has produced many artists throughout history, will be highly significant for our region and the world"* (Anadolu Agency, June 15, 2021). Erdoğan's discourse illustrates how space is transformed from a site of historical memory into a strategic focal point for contemporary shared identity and future vision. In line with Pierre Nora's (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire* - sites of memory - cities like Shusha function as material anchors of collective identity. Such spaces not only preserve the memories of the past but also become sites where those memories are emotionally and symbolically reproduced. Places associated with war, resistance, or reconquest, in particular, serve as symbols through which communities reinforce their identities and regenerate their shared values and sense of belonging. As in the case of Shusha, the act of reclaiming or reasserting control over a space symbolises not only a victory but also enables the community to embody its cultural and historical continuity through spatial terms.

Similarly, the geographical and cultural elements articulated by Nursultan Nazarbayev in his essay *"The Seven Facets of the Great Steppe"* express the idea of spatial continuity



encompassing not only Kazakhstan but the entire Turkic World (Kozyrev, 2019). This discourse positions the geography inhabited by Turkic peoples as the cradle of civilisation and construct's identity unity through a shared spatial heritage. Nazarbayev's approach defines geography not merely by physical borders, but through historical, cultural, and mythological layers of meaning. His narrative, which unifies the roots of Turkic peoples along a historical trajectory stretching from the Altai Mountains to Anatolia, aims at constructing a common consciousness of space.

This spatial consciousness continues to be reinforced through contemporary political visions. In his 2024 statement during Kazakhstan's term presidency of the OTS, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, under the slogan "*TURKIC ERA!*", emphasised that the preservation of the common Turkic heritage and cultural geography is among the organisation's top priorities (OTS, February 15, 2024). Tokayev's discourse signals a strategic orientation not only toward preserving cultural heritage but also toward sustaining a shared spatial identity at the institutional level. In this context, space is understood not only as a medium of remembrance but also as a foundation for reproduction, ownership, and the construction of a future vision.

A similar emphasis is found in the speech delivered by OTS Secretary General Kubanychbek Omuraliev during the 9th Great Hun-Turkic Kurultai in Hungary. Omuraliev stated that the event not only commemorates the common Turkic-Hungarian roots and cultural heritage but also strengthens the spatial projection of the Turkic World within Europe (OTS, August 19, 2023). Such institutional representations function - much like Michel Foucault's (1986) concept of *heterotopia* - as spaces that simultaneously reference the past while representing alternative identity imaginaries. As in the case of Hungary, even spaces that lie geographically outside the centre are integrated into the organisation's narrative at a symbolic level as performative stages of identity.

The discourse of spatial continuity also allows for the reinterpretation of cultural geography within a political framework. Thus, historical spaces transform into symbols that carry not only the memories of the past but also today's political objectives and future strategic visions. Such discourses position space as the carrier of cultural memory, drawing the boundaries of collective identity while simultaneously constructing a shared vision of fate for the Turkic World. This clearly demonstrates that space is not merely geographical, but a tool for forging deep historical and emotional connections.

Symbolic narratives about space are frequently and prominently featured in the documents of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS). In this way, selected places have come to acquire a constitutive role in the ideological and ontological construction of the organisation. The Final Declaration of the 2021 Istanbul Summit, which included proposals such as organising a "Silk Road Rally from the Danube to the Orkhon Valley" and completing the "Sacred Sites of the Turkic World" project, clearly demonstrates the importance attributed to the symbolic value of space (OTS, 2021). Similarly, the 2022 Samarkand Summit Declaration designated Samarkand as the "Cultural Capital of the Turkic World," aiming to reinforce the narrative of a shared civilisational identity through spatial references (OTS, 2022).

Thus, specific places are intended to function not merely as geographical entities but as instruments in the construction of collective identity. Certain locations, beyond their



cultural or historical significance, are imbued with symbolic meanings that reflect the ideals and aspirations of the Turkic world. Drawing on Foucault's (1986) concept of heterotopia, such spaces serve both as sites of historical memory and as imagined arenas for collective purpose. In this regard, places like Shusha carry multilayered meanings: they simultaneously render cultural belonging visible and project the vision of regional integration that the OTS seeks to promote. Consequently, spaces are transformed into strategic sites where identity is materialised, collective memory is transmitted to the present, and the spatial dimension of future expectations is articulated.

Thus, spatial references in institutional documents reinforce the historical continuity, cultural proximity, and shared civilisation narratives of the OTS. Through these spaces, which materialise the narratives, collective identity gains authenticity, emotional connection, and a visual-ideological foundation. The discursive framework constructed through common cities, sacred regions, or historical geographies redefines the borders of the Turkic World not only in a physical sense but also in a symbolic realm. In this way, spatial references evolve into strategic tools that enhance the OTS identity's capacity for emotional connection and strengthen the sense of belonging.

Common Language and Cultural Unity

Another fundamental theme that reinforces the identity of the OTS is the emphasis on shared language and cultural commonality. In the discourse of leaders, these themes are positioned as strategic tools for the formation of a collective consciousness and its transmission to future generations. As Anderson (1991) points out, language lies at the core of meaning-making in the construction of "imagined communities." A common language is not merely a means of communication, but also a vehicle for shared belonging and cultural cohesion.

In his speech at the 2022 Samarkand Summit, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's general emphasis on the common history and future of the Turkic world highlighted the pivotal role of linguistic unity and cultural integration in ensuring the sustainability of unity within the OTS. This aspect does not emerge merely as a result of a motivation for symbolic solidarity. Generations of different countries are intended to be raised with a shared consciousness and identity. Therefore, efforts such as creating a common alphabet, increasing interaction among national education systems, and harmonising curricula represent not only a practical and technical endeavour but also aim to foster convergence among Turkic communities belonging to different states and to build a collective identity. The inclusion of common myths and narratives into national curricula lays the groundwork for the formation of collective identities that go beyond individual state borders and are hoped to be carried into the future.

The harmonisation of national education around selected common narratives contributes not only to intellectual alignment but also adds emotional layers to the collective identity. The existence of new generations raised around shared values facilitates the transfer of the OTS into the future in ontological terms and constitutes an important part of the organisation's vision for the future. This point is clearly evident in the speech of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the 11th OTS Summit, where he emphasised the necessity of



linguistic and cultural unity for the effective and influential existence of the Turkic world. Erdoğan stated, *"We are working meticulously on the common Turkic alphabet. If we can adopt a unified alphabet, we will surpass a historic threshold and achieve a great embrace,"* thereby underscoring that alphabet unification signifies not merely a technical reform but a transformation of identity (QHA, November 8, 2024). His statement reveals that the common alphabet initiative represents a symbolic milestone in the construction of a shared identity, rather than simply a linguistic adjustment.

In this context, Erdoğan's discourse is not just a declaration of political intent but also an example of a strategic narrative that reveals the emotional and cultural dimensions of linguistic integration. Alphabet unity, consistent with Halbwachs's theory of collective memory (as cited in Kølvrå, 2015: 67), functions as a carrier of shared history and cultural memory. Moreover, as Schmitt (2018) argues, strategic discourses gain efficacy when they resonate with existing political myths. Erdoğan's metaphor of a "great embrace" transforms the notion of alphabet reform into a powerful mythological narrative that fosters a sense of cultural unity.

The impact of such discourse extends beyond institutional documents; it also serves as an ideological foundation that contributes to the construction of collective identity in the public sphere. Therefore, Erdoğan's statement demonstrates that the common alphabet holds a foundational function not only on a political and cultural level but also symbolically, positioning it as a core instrument in the formation of a common Turkic identity. The discourse surrounding the common alphabet reflects a strategic attempt to transmit a shared identity to future generations. Concepts such as a "common alphabet" and joint "education initiatives" are not merely technical tools; they function as ideological instruments for the reproduction of collective identity. This narrative constructs a future-oriented vision in which identity is continuously rearticulated through discourse.

At the informal summit held in Shusha in 2024, the President of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and OTS observer member Ersin Tatar, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Turkish Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz, and the host, Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev, all emphasised the cultural significance of Shusha as an important symbol for the unity of the Turkic World (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, March 15, 2024). These statements by leaders highlight the role of cultural symbols in the construction of a shared identity and demonstrate the unifying impact of cultural spaces through collective memory.

Another important example of cultural unity reflected in discourse within the OTS is the celebration of Nowruz. At the 2024 Nowruz celebrations held in Ankara under the auspices of the OTS Secretariat, Turkish President Erdoğan described this holiday as a "symbol of ancient values, peace, and brotherhood" and proposed that Nowruz be celebrated as a "common day of commemoration and festivity for the Turkic World" (BBC News Turkish, March 12, 2025). Similarly, OTS Secretary General Baghdad Amreyev described Nowruz as "one of the most distinguished shared cultural values of the Turkic World" and emphasised its deep historical roots as well as its role in strengthening unity and solidarity (OTS, March 20, 2022).



These approaches to Nowruz show that this holiday is not seen as an ordinary traditional celebration but, rather, is coded as a cultural symbol of strategic importance for the entire Turkic World. The emphasis on a holiday celebrated annually across the Turkic World at the discursive level is the result of an effort to strengthen common belonging and to make emotional unity visible. In this context, shared cultural rituals are highlighted as performative functions for collective identities. It contributes both to the internal legitimation of historical and cultural narratives strengthened through leadership discourse and to the external projection of a message of shared belonging.

In his message on the occasion of Kyrgyzstan's Manas Epic Day, then Secretary General of the Turkic Council, Baghdad Amreyev, described the *Manas Epic* not only as the cultural property of the Kyrgyz people but as "a shared spiritual and cultural heritage of the entire Turkic World" (OTS, December 4, 2020). Amreyev's statement is a discursive example of the collective identity the OTS seeks to construct through shared cultural elements. Presenting the *Manas Epic* not solely as part of Kyrgyz identity but as a symbol of collective memory shared across the Turkic World demonstrates how national narratives are reframed for the purpose of regional identity construction. Within the OTS's emphasis on common language and culture, this approach illustrates how symbolic narratives that reinforce historical ties among members are instrumentalised for collective identity production. Baghdad Amreyev's statement exemplifies how individual national traditions are being recontextualised within a shared Turkic civilisational framework. Rather than presenting cultural values as isolated elements of national heritage, such discourse reframes them as part of a common symbolic reservoir that binds OTS member states together.

These expressions demonstrate that collective identity is sustained not only through remembering the past but also through projecting cultural continuity into the future. By prioritising shared initiatives in language, alphabet, education, and cultural policy, the leaders of the OTS articulate a vision of the organisation that transcends conventional political cooperation. In doing so, the OTS is positioned as a civilisational Project -one that aspires to shape future generations through a unified cultural legacy. This perspective reveals that cultural transmission functions not only as a pedagogical tool but also as an ideological and identity-forming mechanism. Joint initiatives in education, alphabet reform, and culture serve as tools that enable member actors to envision a shared history and future.

At this point, it becomes clear that discourses in the context of identity construction do not remain at a merely symbolic level; rather, through discursive acts, they produce institutional realities. When considered alongside Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities, shared cultural projects and alphabet policies emerge as concrete practices that facilitate the construction of a supra-identity within multinational frameworks. Thus, discourses do not merely generate emotional belonging - they also give rise to institutionalised practices that reinforce that belonging. Accordingly, the discourses of OTS leaders should be interpreted not only as a reflection of the past but also as a performance of identity that engages with the present and projects into the future.



Future Imagination and Shared Vision

In the institutional identity construction of the OTS, the future-oriented discourses of its leaders constitute not only declarations of current political objectives but also foundational elements of a collective imagination. As Schmitt (2018) emphasises, strategic narratives do not merely serve to legitimise the present—they also offer communities a sense of common direction for the future. The effectiveness of this orientation depends on the narrative's resonance with collective memory and existing political myths. In this context, the future-focused statements of OTS leaders indicate that the organisation is not only anchored in the past but is also progressing toward a shared future.

During the 2022 Samarkand Summit, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared: *"As the Turkic World, thank God, we are stronger today than we were yesterday. Our family council, built on a foundation of spiritual unity, has transformed into an international organisation that stands firmly on its feet and moves forward confidently toward the future"* (Takvim, November 11, 2022). This discourse is not merely an evaluation of the present but also a declaration of confidence and strategic orientation regarding the future. Erdoğan positions the OTS as an entity that carries the legacy of the past into the future, showing that the will to shape the future has become an institutionalised narrative.

Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, in the same summit, stated: *"As the countries of the OTS, we must contribute to the resolution of regional and global issues and become a significant force. To overcome threats, we must unite our strength"* (Haber7, November 11, 2022). This statement underscores the potential of the OTS to be not only a cultural union but also a political and strategic actor. It demonstrates that the identity construction of the OTS is framed not solely in symbolic terms but also in functional terms within the realm of international relations.

Emphases on the organisation's potential to emerge as a strong actor that bridges the past and influences the future are clearly reflected in the discourses of its leaders. The future-oriented statements of the leaders concerning the OTS reflect not only their belief in its institutional continuity but also the formation of a shared strategic vision. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev emphasised that, given the OTS's geopolitical position and its natural and human resources, it could become a global centre of power. He expressed his confidence with the assertion: *"The day will come when all the world's problems will be resolved through consultation with the Organisation of Turkic States"* (Anadolu Agency, June 6, 2024). Aliyev's discourse indicates that the Organisation of Turkic States seeks to be regarded in the future not only as stronger and more effective, but also as a more influential actor. The expressions used in Aliyev's speech, such as "all the world's problems" and "consultation," show that at a time when the global system is experiencing various ruptures, the OTS is positioned not merely as an alliance concerned with the issues of its own members, but as an actor with a high capacity for international influence. The expectation attributed to the OTS in this regard both strengthens the common sense of belonging among member states and societies, and at the same time brings the organisation to the fore as an actor with significant potential for influence in the eyes of others (the international community). Similarly, Kazakh President Kassym-



Jomart Tokayev pointed to a comparable vision by highlighting that the OTS has quickly become a “respected organisation” whose visibility and influence in the international system are increasing (TRT Avaz, November 6, 2024).

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s statement, “*We will work with all our strength to make the upcoming era the Century of the Turkic World*” (Anadolu Agency, November 7, 2024), stands out as the strongest expression of an effort to position the OTS as a long-term regional power hub. These discourses contribute not only to the organisation’s current political agenda but also to its ontological construction; they directly address the questions of what the OTS is and what it aspires to become, defining its institutional identity within the framework of a future-oriented vision. The global vision articulated most clearly by Aliyev and Erdoğan illustrates the OTS’s pursuit of becoming not just a platform for cooperation but a political and cultural subject in the international system. Moreover, these discourses, by emphasising the organisation’s continuity across past, present, and future, reveal an effort to construct a secure ontological subjectivity for the OTS.

Such discourses also find resonance in the “*Turkic World Vision 2040*” document adopted at the 2021 Istanbul Summit. The document sets forth the objective of transforming the Turkic World into a more active actor in international relations, a culturally integrated entity, and one that is adaptable to technological developments (OTS, 2021). This document is not merely a technical strategic text; it also provides an ideological framework concerning the *raison d’être* of the OTS. In alignment with Anderson’s (1991) concept of “imagined communities,” this framework illustrates how a shared vision of the future reinforces communal belonging.

In this context, the future-oriented emphases in the leaders’ discourse demonstrate that the continuity of the OTS’s identity is ensured not only through remembrance of the past but also through the construction of a shared vision. This vision strengthens the sense of belonging within member communities while simultaneously repositioning the OTS as both a regional and global actor.

Conclusion and Evaluation

Discourse is not merely a reflective but also a constitutive and transformative element in identity construction. In post-structuralist international relations literature, identities are not fixed, natural, or predetermined structures; rather, they are continuously reproduced through social practices and discourse. According to this approach, the question of “who” an actor is is determined not by what it does, but by how it defines itself and how it is positioned by others. Discourse constructs identity through historical narratives, collective memory, symbols, and visions of the future. In this regard, actors respond to the questions “who are we?” and “who are we not?” through discursive frameworks.

For international organisations, this process is even more pronounced. Given their multi-actor composition, identity construction must be carried out through discourse. Within this framework, institutional documents, summit declarations, and leaders’ speeches do not merely convey information - they shape the existence, meaning system, and collective belonging of the organisation.



This study highlights the significance of the discourses of member states and organisational leaders in the ontological construction of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) as a social and political entity. The political narratives emphasised in leaders' discourses not only point to an effort to legitimise interstate cooperation, but also aim to bring together the societies of member states around a shared past, common values and symbols, cultural affinities, and a vision for the future. Within these discourses, four main themes come to the fore: historical continuity, spatial belonging, cultural-linguistic unity, and future-oriented vision.

By invoking a shared past, leaders seek to present the existence of the OTS as a natural outcome of historical continuity. In doing so, the OTS is positioned ontologically not as a contingent or merely technical organisation, but as an entity with an organic foundation. Persistent references to certain selected places, and the symbolic emphasis attached to them, also serve to materialise historical continuity in spatial terms. Discourses on common language, alphabet, culture, and education represent an effort to ensure the continuity of cultural unity transmitted from the past through new generations. In this way, it is intended that new generations who embrace a collective identity around shared cultural dynamics will guarantee both the institutional and ontological continuity of the Turkic World. Finally, the assertive references made by leaders regarding the future of both the OTS and the Turkic World aim to demonstrate the organisation's place within the international system, which shows strong signs of transformation in the 21st century. In this context, the Turkic World, as articulated by OTS leaders, aspires to emerge as an influential and powerful actor in shaping the future global order.

This study also contributes to the broader literature on the construction of identities within international organisations. In this respect, the attainment of an ontological existence by international organisations, alongside their institutional construction, involves a threefold process. First, leaders perceive the existence of such organisations not as coincidental but as a natural outcome of historical continuity. In line with this perspective, facts, events, and symbols from the past are selectively transformed into various narratives through discourse. Subsequently, these narratives are transferred into summit declarations or official documents, thereby acquiring an institutional dimension. Thirdly, these elements are systematically repeated and revised in accordance with emerging needs throughout the process.

References

- Acharya, A. (2014). *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*. Routledge.
- Akçapa, M. (2023). Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı'nın Tarihsel Gelişimi: Teşkilatın Dünü, Bugünü Ve Yarını. *Avrasya Uluslararası Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 11 (34), 473-491.
- Aliyev, İ. (14.02.2024). İlham Əliyevin andıçmə mərasimi keçirilib. (Accessed March 29, 2025), <https://president.az/az/articles/view/63979>



Altymyshova, Z., & Omurova, C. (2025). Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı'nın Tarihi Gelişimi Ve Gelecek Vizyonu. *Marmara Türkiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 12 (Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı Özel Sayısı), 41-64.

Anatolian Agency. (15.06.2021). *Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Şuşa'da en kısa sürede başkonsolosluk açmayı planlıyoruz*. (Accessed February 04, 2025), <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-susada-en-kisa-surede-baskonsolosluk-acmayi-planliyoruz/2274748>

Anatolian Agency. (05.06.2023). *Şuşa Türk Dünyası'nın Kültür Başkenti ilan edildi*. (Accessed February 12, 2025), <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/kultur-sanat/susa-turk-dunyasinin-kultur-baskenti-ilan-edildi/2925070>

Anatolian Agency. (06.06.2024). *Azerbaycan Cumhurbaşkanı Aliyev: Gün gelecek dünya sorunları Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı ile istişare yoluyla çözülecektir*. (Accessed January 24, 2025), <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/azerbaycan-cumhurbaskani-aliev-gun-gelecek-dunya-sorunlari-turk-devletleri-teskilati-ile-istisare-yoluyla-cozulecektir/3242539>

Anatolian Agency. (07.11.2024). *Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Önümüzdeki dönemi Türk Dünyası Yüzyılı yapmak için tüm gücümüzle çalışacağız*. (Accessed December 11, 2024), <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-onumuzdeki-donemi-turk-dunyasi-yuzyili-yapmak-icin-tum-gucumuzle-calisacagiz/3385526>

Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.

Arıdemir, H. (Ed.). (2022). *Yeni Dünya Düzeninde Özbekistan*. İstanbul Ticaret Odası Ülke Araştırmaları, Publication No: 2022-12.

Assmann, J. (2011). *Cultural memory and early civilisation: Writing, remembrance, and political imagination*. Cambridge University Press.

Aydilek, E. (2022). Türk Devletleri Teşkilatının Siyasi Ve Ekonomik Potansiyeli. *Uluslararası Yönetim Akademisi Dergisi*, 5 (3), 716-728.

BBC News Turkish. (14.11.2021). *Macaristan Başbakanı Orban: 'Yüzyıllarca Türk halklarıyla birlikte yaşadık, bundan gurur duyuyoruz'*. (Accessed February 09, 2025), <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-59276998>

BBC News Turkish. (21.03.2025). *Ankara'da, Türk devletlerinin temsilcileri ile Nevruz kutlaması*. (Accessed February 09, 2025), <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/c0kqmg0p78o>

Bell, D. (2003). Mythscapes: Memory, mythology, and national identity. *British Journal of Sociology*, 54 (1), 63-81.

Bikmen, N. (2015). History as a Resource: Effects of Narrative Constructions of Group History on Intellectual Performance. *Journal of Social Issues*, 71 (2), 309-323.

Bilgin, N. (2013). *Tarih ve kolektif bellek*. Bağlam Yayıncılık.



Çınar, Y., & Uzun, Y. U. (2023). Köklü Geçmişten Güçlü Geleceğe Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı: Küresel Ekonomik-Siyasal Potansiyeli Ve Teşkilatın Geleceğine Dair Öngörüler. *MANAS Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 12 (Özel Sayı), 141-156.

Emeklier, B., Taş, T., & Yılmaz, K. Ç. (2022). Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı: Bütünleşme Sürecine Nereden Başlamalı Ve Ne Yapmalı?. *Güvenlik Stratejileri Dergisi*, 18 (38), 73-107.

Erkiner, H. H., & Eray, İ. (2022). Uluslararası Hukuk Bakımından Bir Uluslararası Örgüt Olarak Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı. *Güvenlik Stratejileri Dergisi*, 18 (38), 217-250.

Foucault, M. (1986). Of other spaces. *Diacritics*, 16(1), 22-27.

Gabel, I. (2013). Historical memory and collective identity: West Bank settlers reconstruct the past. *Media, Culture & Society*, 35 (2), 250-259.

Gee, J. P. (2011). *How to do discourse analysis: A toolkit*. Routledge.

Giddens, A. (2014). *Modernite ve bireysel kimlik: Geç modern çağda benlik ve toplum* (Ü. Tatlıcan, Trans., 2. Pub.), Say Publications.

Gündoğdu, S. (2023). Türkiye'nin Jeopolitik Açılımı: Bir Uluslararası Örgüt Olarak Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı. *Celal Bayar Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 21 (3), 266-279.

Haber7. (11.11.2022). *Tokayev'den Türk devletlerine: Birleşik eğitim sistemi oluşturulmalı*. (Accessed January 15, 2025), <https://www.haber7.com/dunya/haber/3276715-tokayevden-turk-devletlerine-birlesik-egitim-sistemi-olusturulmali>

Hülse, R. (2006). Imagine the EU: the metaphorical construction of a supra-nationalist identity. *J Int Relat Dev*. 9, 396-421.

Jane, M. (2025). Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı Supranasyonel Bir Aktör Olabilir Mi?: Türk Birliği Yaklaşımları Çerçevesinde Bir Değerlendirme. *Marmara Türkiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 12 (Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı Özel Sayısı), 168-192.

Kierkegaard, S. (1985). *Philosophical Fragments* (Trans. H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong.). Princeton University Press.

Korkmaz, Ö. F., & Soğukoğlu Korkmaz, S. (2024). Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı Ekonomik İşbirliğinin Bankacılık Ve Finans Boyutu. *Düşünce Dünyasında Türkiz*, 15 (3), 469-492.

Kozyrev, T. (2019). Kazakistan Cumhurbaşkanı Ekselansları Nursultan NAZARBAYEV'den Ulusa Sesleniş: Büyük Bozkır'ın Yedi Özelliği. *Aydın Türklük Bilgisi*, 5 (1), 1-13.

Kølvraa, C. (2015). Past and Future in the Construction of Communal Identity: Collective Memory and Mythical Narratives. *Scandinavian Studies in Language*, 6 (3), 62-80.

Kratochwil, F. (1989). *Rules, Norms, And Decisions: On The Conditions Of Practical And Legal Reasoning in International Relations And Domestic Affairs*. Cambridge University Press.

Krippendorff, K. (2013). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (3rd ed.). Sage.



Milliyet. (13.11.2021). 'Güneşin yeniden doğudan doğacağı günler yakındır'. (Accessed, February 24, 2025), <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/gunesin-yeniden-dogudan-dogacagi-gunler-yakindir-6641072>

Misztal, B. A. (2003). *Theories of social remembering*. Open University Press.

Motzafi-Haller, P. (1994). Historical narratives as political discourses of identity. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20 (3), 417–431.

Nora, P. (1989). Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire. *Representations*, 26, 7–24.

Olick, J. K., & Robbins, J. (1998). Social memory studies: From "collective memory" to the historical sociology of mnemonic practices. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24 (1), 105–140.

Onuf, N. (1989). *World Of Our Making: Rules And Rule in Social Theory And International Relations*. University Of South Carolina Press.

OTS. (04.12.2020). *Türk Konseyi Genel Sekreterinin Kırgızistan'ın Manas Destanı Günü vesilesiyle tebrik mesajı*. (Accessed February 04, 2025), <http://turkicstates.org/tr/haber/turk-konseyi-genel-sekreterinin-kirgizistanin-manas-destani-gunu-vesilesiyle-tebrik-mesaji>

OTS. (2021). 8. *Zirve (İstanbul) Sonuç Bildirgesi*. (Accessed February 09, 2025), <https://www.turkicstates.org/u/d/basic-documents-tr/8-zirve-bildirisi-15-tr.pdf>

OTS. (2022). 9. *Zirve (Semerkant) Bildirisi*. (Accessed January 04, 2025), <https://www.turkicstates.org/u/d/basic-documents-tr/9-zirve-bildirisi-16-tr.pdf>

OTS. (20.03.2022). *Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı Genel Sekreterinin Nevruz Bayramı vesilesiyle tebrik mesajı*. (Accessed February 24, 2025), <https://www.turkicstates.org/tr/haber/turk-devletleri-teskilati-genel-sekreterinin-nevruz-bayrami-vesilesiyle-tebrik-mesaji>

OTS. (19.08.2023). *TDT Genel Sekreteri Macaristan Ulusal Meclisi'nde bir konuşma yaptı*. (Accessed February 16, 2025), <https://www.turkicstates.org/tr/haber/tdt-genel-sekreteri-macaristan-ulusal-meclisinde-bir-konusma-yapti>

OTS. (15.02.2024). *Kazakistan Cumhurbaşkanı dönem başkanlığını değerlendirdi*. (Accessed February 04, 2025), <https://www.turkicstates.org/tr/haber/president-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-reflected-on-the-kazakhtans-successes-during-its-ots-chairmanship-3>

Özsoy, B. (2023). 'Türk Dünyası' Söylemi İçinde Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı'nın Rolü Ve Önemi. *Anasay*, 25, 40-55.

President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (15.03.2024). *President Ilham Aliyev attended the opening ceremony of "Shusha – the Cultural Capital of the Turkic World"*. (Accessed January 19, 2025), <https://president.az/en/articles/view/66415>

QHA. (08.11.2024). *Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'dan Türk dünyasında ortak alfabe açıklaması*. (Accessed January 20, 2025), <https://www.qha.com.tr/turk-dunyasi/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-dan-turk-dunyasinda-ortak-alfabe-aciklamasi-497647>



Ricoeur, P. (1984). *Time and Narrative* (Vol. 1, Trans. K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer). University of Chicago Press.

Risse, T. (2010). *A Community of Europeans? Transnational Identities and Public Spheres*. Cornell University Press.

Schmidtke, O. (2023). Competing historical narratives: Memory politics, identity, and democracy in Germany and Poland. *Social Sciences*, 12 (7), 391.

Schmitt, O. (2018). When are strategic narratives effective? The shaping of political discourse through the interaction between political myths and strategic narratives. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 39 (4), 487-511.

Slocum-Bradley, N. (2010). Identity Construction in Europe: A Discursive Approach. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, 10 (1), 50-68.

Takvim. (11.11.2022). *Başkan Erdoğan'dan Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı Devlet ve Hükümet Başkanları 9. Zirvesi'nde önemli açıklamalar*. (Accessed February 01, 2025), <https://www.takvim.com.tr/guncel/2022/11/11/baskan-erdogandan-turk-devletleri-teskilati-devlet-ve-hukumet-baskanlari-9-zirvesinde-onemli-aciklamalar>

Tekir, G. (2023). Türk Devletleri Teşkilatının Yeni-İşlevselcilik Ve Devletlerarasıcılık Teorileri Bağlamında Değerlendirilmesi. *Abant Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 23 (2), 1084-1097.

TRNC. (06.11.2024). Cumhurbaşkanı Ersin Tatar, Kırgızistan'da gerçekleşen Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı (TDT) Devlet Başkanları Konseyi 11'inci Zirvesi'nde konuştu. (Accessed January 13, 2025), <https://www.kktcb.org/tr/cumhurbaskani-ersin-tatar-kirgizistanda-gerceklesen-turk-devletleri-teskilati-tdt-devlet-12894>

TRT Avaz. (12.11.2021). *Kazakistan Kurucu Cumhurbaşkanı Nazarbayev, Türk Konseyi Devlet Başkanları 8. Zirvesi'nde konuştu*. (Accessed January 20, 2025), <https://www.trtavaz.com.tr/haber/tur/avrasyadan/kazakistan-kurucu-cumhurbaskani-nazarbayev-turk-konseyi-devlet-baskanlari-8-zi/618e8c1a01a30a898c53f472>

TRT Avaz. (06.11.2024). *Kazakistan Cumhurbaşkanı Tokayev: "Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı, kısa sürede saygın bir kuruluşa dönüştü."* (Accessed January 25, 2025), <https://www.trtavaz.com.tr/haber/tur/avrasyadan/kazakistan-cumhurbaskani-tokayev-turk-devletleri-teskilati-kisa-surede-saygin/672b4729ec7abc75138580fc>

uzbekistan.org.ua. (11.11.2022). *Uzbekistan aiming for progress and prosperity of the Turkic world*. (Accessed January 31, 2025), <https://uzbekistan.org.ua/en/news/6746-uzbekistan-aiming-for-progress-and-prosperity-of-the-turkic-world.html>

Uzunağaç, E. (2025). Bağımsızlıktan Kurumsallaşmaya: Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı'nın Kuruluş Süreci. *Marmara Türkiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 12 (Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı Özel Sayısı), 268-285.

Wendt, A. (1999). *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2015). *Methods of critical discourse studies* (3rd ed.). Sag

BALANCING AN EMERGING POWER'S INFLUENCE: CAMBODIA'S FOREIGN POLICY CHOICES WITHIN ASEAN UNDER CHINESE ECONOMIC LEVERAGE

YELIZAVETA YURCHENKO

yelizaveta.yurchenko@gmail.com

Post-Graduate, Karadeniz Technical University

ÖZGÜR TÜFEKÇİ

ozgurtufekci@ktu.edu.tr

Associate Professor, Karadeniz Technical University (Turkey). Director-General of CESRAN International. ORCID: 0000-0002-4335-2909

Abstract

The essay aims to explore Cambodia's behaviour and decisions in the international arena, which emerged from its close economic cooperation with China. This paper uses the ASEAN ministerial meeting in 2012, the Ream Naval Base dispute, and the Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure project as case studies. In this way, we obtained detailed information about the specific mechanisms of influence of the above-mentioned events on Cambodia's further decisions in foreign policy. This paper reveals that the long-term multidimensional cooperation between China and Cambodia has had a direct impact on Cambodia's diplomatic activities within ASEAN, ensuring the protection of China's geopolitical interests at the cost of destabilising a crucial regional bloc. It follows that in order to preserve the unity of ASEAN and take the maximum strategic benefit from partners, Cambodia needs to apply a balance mechanism between cooperation with China and the Southeast Alliance.

Keywords

ASEAN; Economic cooperation; The Belt and Road Initiative; Chinese investment; Cambodia's foreign policy.

Resumo

O ensaio tem como objetivo explorar o comportamento e as decisões do Camboja na arena internacional, que surgiram da sua estreita cooperação económica com a China. Este artigo utiliza a reunião ministerial da ASEAN em 2012, a disputa da Base Naval de Ream e o projeto de infraestrutura da Iniciativa Belt and Road como estudos de caso. Desta forma, obtivemos informações detalhadas sobre os mecanismos específicos de influência dos eventos acima mencionados nas decisões futuras do Camboja em matéria de política externa. Este artigo revela que a cooperação multidimensional de longo prazo entre a China e o Camboja teve um impacto direto nas atividades diplomáticas do Camboja dentro da ASEAN, garantindo a proteção dos interesses geopolíticos da China à custa da desestabilização de um bloco regional crucial. Conclui-se que, para preservar a unidade da ASEAN e obter o máximo benefício estratégico dos parceiros, o Camboja precisa aplicar um mecanismo de equilíbrio entre a cooperação com a China e a Aliança do Sudeste Asiático.



Palavras-chave

ASEAN; Cooperação económica; Iniciativa Belt and Road; Investimento chinês; Política externa do Camboja.

How to cite this article

Yurchenko, Yelizaveta & Tüfekçi, Özgür (2025). Balancing an Emerging Power's Influence: Cambodia's Foreign Policy Choices within Asean under Chinese Economic Leverage. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 434-451. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.23>

Article submitted on 09th July 2025 and accepted for publication on 08th October 2025.





BALANCING AN EMERGING POWER'S INFLUENCE: CAMBODIA'S FOREIGN POLICY CHOICES WITHIN ASEAN UNDER CHINESE ECONOMIC LEVERAGE

YELIZAVETA YURCHENKO

ÖZGÜR TÜFEKÇİ

Introduction

Cambodia's foreign policy has been noticeably leaning towards China since the 1950s, owing to its facilitation and aid in the desperate struggle against Western influence. A closer chapter in relations between Cambodia and China began after the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975, led by Pol Pot. Since then, Cambodia has been provided with financial aid, funding for infrastructure development projects, military equipment, and even the use of a partnership with China as a trump card in relations with great powers and potentially concerning neighbours. In the current period of rivalry between the great powers, Cambodia finds itself balancing between ASEAN and its long-standing and solid alliance with China.

Such close economic ties definitely influence Cambodia's decisions in terms of foreign policy. Cambodia prioritises the direct interests of China over the interests of ASEAN countries. In this sense, this study addresses the following research questions: 1) How have Cambodia's relations with China influenced its foreign policy decisions? 2) What specific actions linked to this alignment have disrupted ASEAN's cohesion? The central hypothesis is that Cambodia's deepening economic interdependence with China has encouraged policy choices that prioritise Beijing's strategic interests, often at the expense of ASEAN consensus.

This research adopts a qualitative case study approach to analyse the influence of Sino-Cambodian economic ties on Phnom Penh's foreign policy. Three cases were selected based on their relevance to ASEAN unity and their demonstrated linkage to Chinese interests: the 2012 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, the Ream Naval Base developments, and Cambodia's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative. Data sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, ASEAN official documents, policy reports, and news outlets. Content analysis is applied to trace patterns of diplomatic alignment and identify causal mechanisms between economic dependence and political positioning.

It is hypothesised that strong ties between Cambodia and China have led to strained relations with the countries of Southeast Asia through their foreign policy choices. Assumptions can be made based on recent research materials. According to Khath Bunthorn (2022), even though membership in ASEAN has security, economic, and



diplomatic advantages, Cambodia still prioritises China's interests, thereby sowing discord and weakening the centralisation of such an important regional organisation as ASEAN.

To a greater extent, Samath (2020) supports this point of view and asserts that Cambodia's decisions in foreign policy are primarily pragmatic economic calculations in order to obtain the greatest possible benefit. It is noted that Cambodia should adopt this pragmatism with the BRI to achieve its economic development goals. Another aspect is that Cambodia should balance relations with ASEAN and China to avoid the risks of full-scale bandwagoning.

Validating the position of Samath (2020), Sothirak (2021) asserts that Cambodia should avoid the risk of economic dependence and isolation in the region due to the alliance with China, and also learn to balance the competition of great powers in the regional context. Another study conducted by Charadine (2020) affirms that Cambodia aims to apply a varied and balanced foreign policy, even though it is involved in security disputes with Thailand and the South China Sea disputes, which are bound to deep ties with China.

Po and Primiano (2020) reinforce the opinion and expand on this by revealing that, except for economic benefit and prompt development, Cambodia advocates Chinese interests in its foreign affairs and also for keeping Hun Sen's regime in power, as well as securing protection from Vietnamese threats and assessing ASEAN's effectiveness. Williamson (2023) agrees that linkages with China help Hun Sen to maintain the regime through domestic policies and supportive behaviour in the international arena. In return, Cambodia has been generously endowed with investment, funding, diplomatic friendship, and political endorsement.

Challenging the common consensus among experts, who claim that economic bonds with China negatively affect relations with neighbouring countries, Chheang (2022) argues that Cambodia does not prioritise China in its foreign policy decision-making but uses a hedging strategy and a multilateral approach. In particular, Chheang claims that ASEAN has been asserted as a crucial element of Cambodia's foreign policy, acting as a 'reliable security shield' and as an important element in promoting the economic integration of countries and development in the South Asian region.

Recent research on the topic reveals that the multifaceted relationship between China and Cambodia not only provides significant economic development to the latter but also leads to geopolitical repercussions, primarily strained relations with neighbouring countries and ASEAN partners. As an illustration, China's support in the South China Sea has led to doubts about whether Cambodia follows the principles of common security and cooperation or sows security uncertainty in the region. In general, we can see that there is agreement in this fieldwork, and most researchers believe that Cambodia does take a pro-China position in its foreign policy, which hurts regional stability and security. However, at the same time, some studies examine Cambodia's efforts to mitigate the negative consequences of economic cooperation with China and balance multilateral relations with neighbouring countries.

Following this brief outline of China's influence on Cambodia's foreign policy, this essay will delve deeper into the particular means through which the Sino-Cambodian economic



relationships affect the decisions that Cambodia makes in the international context, as well as what impact it has on the geopolitical situation in Southeast Asia.

Even though a large number of studies (e.g. Samath, 2020; Charadine, 2020; Po and Primiano, 2020; Sothirak, 2021; Williamson, 2023) have been conducted on the subject of economic Sino-Cambodian bonds and their outcomes for the Southeast region, there is a gap in evaluating how Cambodia's Chinese orientation in foreign policy affects unity within ASEAN and its ability to speak with one voice on issues of regional security, infrastructure development, and economic integration. According to current research, it is clear that Cambodia's pro-China policy is negatively impacting ASEAN internal relations. Still, the literature has largely overlooked the exact mechanisms and specific decisions on Cambodia's part that have led to this phenomenon.

Historical perspective of the Sino-Cambodian alliance

Historically, Sino-Cambodian relations have gone through various phases of closeness and cooperation. The coming to power of the Khmer Rouge was a turning point in bilateral relations because China provided considerable military and political support to the Pol Pot regime. Allegedly, the four-year genocide was partly financed by China, along with other radical and violent policies of the Khmer Rouge. The next stage was a significant drop in the strong ties between China and Cambodia due to Vietnamese influence, and fueling the civil war in Cambodia to fulfil its strategic interests.

The mediation of relations between Cambodia and China took place in 1997, which accompanied the internal conflict between key influential leaders - Prince Norodom Ranariddh of FUNCINPEC and Hun Sen of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). Western countries refused to provide any support to Cambodia due to human rights violations and accusations of authoritarianism, demanding a peaceful and democratic suspension of the affair. Taking advantage of Cambodia's isolation from its Western partners, China provided extensive diplomatic mediation and financial backing, and in response, Hun Sen supported the One-China policy (Chen, 2018).

Hun Sen's authoritarian rule increased tensions with the Western powers, which allowed a significant deepening of diplomatic, financial, and cultural relations with China in the early 2000s. Over the next few years, China became Cambodia's most influential strategic partner. This was manifested in the fact that Beijing provided the largest financial aid compared to any other state in the world. In addition, Cambodia was completely exempted from debt payments to China. The cultural ties between Cambodia and China have acquired an unprecedented dimension in terms of the spread of the Chinese language and the aspirations of Cambodian youth to study in Chinese metropolises instead of universities in leading European countries, as was the case before. Cultural solidarity was also manifested in the widespread distribution of Chinese mass media and the increase in tourists and migrants (Kurlantzick, 2006). In addition, Cambodia could count on solid support for sovereignty and diplomatic cooperation, which was followed by mutual visits of high-ranking officials.

Bilateral relations between Cambodia and China reached their peak in the 2010s when Cambodia became a key partner of China in the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative.



China has expanded its sphere of influence due to the rapid development of infrastructure, economic integration, and international cooperation, which has certainly become beneficial for Cambodia; nevertheless, it is a considerable financial risk that calls into question the sovereignty of the latter (Heng & Po, 2017). Cambodia is one of the countries that benefited the most from participating in the initiative; therefore, in return, it provided full backing and support to China in political matters. Based on such proficient cooperation, the trade partnership of the countries has also significantly deepened. Thus, China has become a central figure in Cambodia's foreign policy, providing developmental financing, trading partnerships, and political assistance.

Strategic tools of China's alignment with Cambodia

The alignment of Cambodia and China was brought to life thanks to a number of strategic instruments that allowed the development of strong bilateral relations. To these, we can include financial and investment aids in the form of infrastructure development and the BRI project¹, numerous trade agreements, cultural and ideological support, and an unconditional diplomatic pillar. Undoubtedly, such a close connection between Phnom Penh and Beijing allowed Cambodia to develop economically very quickly, and the country's leader consolidated his position and increased the significance of the state's voice in the regional context, owing to Chinese backing. This chapter will describe three dimensions of the mechanisms by which China was able to secure comprehensive assistance to Cambodia and obtain the most ardent partner in ASEAN and Southeast Asia.

The basis of infrastructure development and investment in Cambodia is project lending from China. This process is mutually beneficial for both sides. In this way, China receives all the advantages inherent in the investor. Still, at the same time, it allows the strengthening of economic and financial relations with Cambodia by meeting its critical needs at the state level. These include agriculture, electrical infrastructure, transport links, and bridge networks. Chinese investment in Cambodia was concentrated in these areas; after all, Cambodia received \$125 million in loans for the development of national roads, the construction of eight dams worth \$1 billion was financed, as well as \$436 million in investments in agriculture between 2009 and 2011, and others (Ciorciari, 2013). This investment trend is expected to continue gaining momentum in the future, and even excluding the billions of dollars that Cambodia received under the Belt and Road initiative, China continues to provide financial support in the form of \$588 million for the development of the textile industry from 2019 to 2021. Which, in turn, plays almost the biggest role in Cambodia's export of products (Reuters, 2019).

Alongside this, FDI statistics indicate that Cambodia is one of the leading countries in Southeast Asia, which is confirmed by Chea Vuthy, Secretary General of the Cambodia Investment Board of the CDC and Member of TPAB, who declares that despite a 40% investment decline in the region experienced in 2020, Cambodia has maintained a solid annual level of \$3.6 billion. As reported by the Council for the Development of Cambodia

¹ "One Belt One Road" (OBOR) was officially renamed to "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) in 2016 to emphasize inclusiveness and avoid misunderstanding concerning the project's goals.



(CDC), in the first half of 2023, China became the leading investor, accounting for 42.1% of Cambodia's total FDI (Kunmakara, 2023).

As of 2020, Cambodia has become the second largest recipient of China's FDI stock after Singapore among Southeast Asian countries, accounting for 14.9%, surpassing Thailand's 11.1%, Indonesia's 11.0%, and Myanmar's 9.8% (Mingey et al., 2023). Accordingly, this demonstrates that no ASEAN country has such a high share of Chinese investment to achieve parity with Cambodia. Unlike Singapore, which held the leading position in 2020 but has a highly diversified economy, Chinese investment in Cambodia has a fundamentally different and systemic nature, encompassing infrastructure, energy, and defence development.

Trade is another important dimension that we need to consider in order to understand the specific mechanisms on which strong ties between China and Cambodia are built. In 2010, a trade agreement was concluded between China and ASEAN, which in turn made China not only the largest trading partner for the member countries but also the first country to export to them. Despite this, Cambodia became the first country to engage in bilateral trade with China among all ASEAN countries that were also included in the agreement. According to the agreement, the volume of trade between the two countries in 2017 should have reached 5 billion dollars (Pheakdey, 2012). Additionally, the formation of the CCTFA in 2020 and Cambodia's ratification of the RCEP in 2021 allowed the total trade in 2023 to increase to \$12.26 billion, with the prospect of further growth (The Phnom Penh Post, 2024). Such cooperation in the field of trade opens wide economic opportunities for Cambodia, having China as a market for export goods, while deepening the strategic partnership and the importance of China in shaping its policy at various levels.

In addition, current statistics demonstrate a significant ongoing expansion of Sino-Cambodian cooperation in the field of trade. According to data released by the General Department of Customs and Excise of Cambodia (GDCE), trade volume reached \$4.48B in 2024, which is more than 15% higher compared to 2023. Taking this into account, China ranks first as a trading ally, outperforming the US, Vietnam, Japan, and Thailand. In addition, according to GDCE bilateral trade data, Cambodia's exports to China increased by 22.3% in 2024 compared to the previous year and amounted to \$1.6B, while Cambodian imports from China increased by 24.5% year-on-year. Both sides gain substantially from this long-term trade cooperation, with Cambodia enjoying access to the extensive Chinese market and Chinese enterprises investing in Cambodia making the most of Cambodia's preferential tariffs on exports to the United States (Sgueglia, 2025).

Along with the mechanisms described above, another key framework was China's soft diplomacy towards Cambodia. While the world community grew concerned about human rights abuses, rising levels of corruption, and misrule in the highest echelons of government in Cambodia, China has not raised any questions on these grounds and has continued to be a reliable and generous partner with continued absolute backing. This was seen in the fact that China's diplomatic mission is the largest in Phnom Penh, and financial investment in development has never stopped since then. In response to such warm regard, Cambodia provided China with unlimited access to its own economy, fulfilling any whims of its partner, for example, the repatriation of the Uyghurs. Such a



soft alliance-oriented policy of China has always allowed Cambodia to seek assistance without facing condemnation (Burgos & Ear, 2010).

Therefore, these factors, in the guise of investments in development, numerous trade agreements, and favourable, friendly diplomacy, have become key in achieving such deep bilateral cooperation between Cambodia and China, which is characterised by even greater economic dependence.

The role of Cambodia in the South China Sea dispute

Cambodia has emerged as a divisive member of the South China Sea dispute by cooperating closely with China and not adopting a conventional position, unlike other ASEAN countries. This was manifested in multiple blockages of multilateral negotiations, especially in 2012 during the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, which led to the impossibility of issuing a joint communique. These actions on the part of Cambodia once again highlighted the level of economic and diplomatic dependence on China and the undeniable readiness to protect their interests both on the world stage and across the region in the disputed waters of the South China Sea.

The ministerial meeting in 2012 became the most prominent symbol of disunity in ASEAN, while Cambodia held the chair and was in the process of deepening economic, financial, and ideological cooperation with China. The first failure in the organisation's history to sign a joint communique revealed ASEAN's vulnerability to external interference. A critical point was the intention of Vietnam and the Philippines to include the Scarborough Shoal disputes and exclusive economic zones. Still, the representative of Cambodia, after speaking with non-participating advisers, rejected this intention as an irrelevant issue. Reportedly, drafts of the meeting were shared with the Chinese side, which confirmed foreign interference and external influence on Cambodia's actions. Failure to sign the joint communique lowered the image of the organisation's influence, highlighted organisational gaps and disunity among the members, and revealed China's desire to weaken the unity of the regional bloc through the Cambodian agency (Bower, 2012).

Based on this information and reports of the meeting, a reasonable question arises: Did any events precede Cambodia's decision and the subsequent blocking of the signing of the joint communique? An assumption can be made on the fact that just a few days before the meeting in July 2012, Hun Sen met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of China, where once again they announced the principles of their comprehensive cooperation, which consists of economic and political support for the sovereignty of Cambodia, and in return, China was provided with protection of their key political interests. Financial aid and large investments helped China finally win the favour and help of Cambodia in the South China Sea issues and become a major diplomatic partner. In addition, the volume of Chinese investments in Cambodia by 2011 amounted to more than 8.8 billion dollars, which cements the title of China as the first and largest investor, but only in 2011 the amount of investment amounted to more than 1.9 billion dollars, which emphasises the scale of China's financial influence on Cambodia preceding the Ministerial meeting (Ciorciari, 2013).



Cambodia's unquestioning and absolute commitment to China has shown the inability of ASEAN as a bloc to share a common position on the South China Sea dispute. The blocking of arguments that were objectionable to China at the ministerial meeting in 2012 revealed that the organisation lacked ideological unity and shared no common opinion. In addition, under a secret agreement, Cambodia granted China access to twenty per cent of its coastline and the use of the Ream Naval base, which further increased the insecurity of the region in connection with possible hostilities (Florick, 2021). The inability of the Southeast bloc to come to a common ground in resolving the issue has called into question ASEAN's overall ability to support regional security and stabilisation issues.

Ream Naval Base tensions

After the impossibility of reaching a common agreement in 2012, uncertainty about Cambodia's position grew and caused numerous disputes among ASEAN countries. The next development that attracted the attention of the world community was allowing China to use a naval military base on the southern coast of Cambodia. While reports said that the naval base had come under Chinese control and Phnom Penh denied any secret deals, the security issue became more compelling on the agenda of countries in the regional bloc, especially for Thailand and Vietnam, due to direct geopolitical and economic threats. The motivations for the concerns of these countries were different. Still, they agreed that China replaced the United States of America, led the way in the development, and allegedly invested in the construction of a naval base in the Gulf of Thailand.

Although China justified the large financial investment in the construction of the military base for diplomatic and peaceful logistical reasons, Thailand remained edgy that the naval base would later be used for purposes other than those previously defined. Thailand's lack of confidence in security, as expressed by Cambodia, which assures that the port is in no way used for military purposes, is supported by satellite imagery, which confirms the presence of Chinese warships in the port. This has become clear proof that, in addition to all areas of bilateral cooperation between Cambodia and China, including diplomatic and economic ties, relations have acquired a new vector and developed militarily as well, bringing even more regional insecurity and allowing China's influence in the sea to grow. Thus, such a Cambodia-friendly country as Thailand will not be able to maintain neutrality regarding the situation in Ream Base in the future because it carries unreserved economic and security perturbations (Spadaccini & Makornwattana, 2024).

Concerns about the Ream Naval Base have also not gone unnoticed by Vietnam because the military port is territorially located in close proximity to Vietnam, and the build-up of Chinese naval forces could mean a worsening of the situation in strategic trade routes, as well as security uncertainty due to existing disputes between Hanoi and Beijing about the situation in the South China Sea. Vietnam found itself in a critically unfavourable situation, as it faced Chinese military facilities in the South China Sea on its northern and eastern borders, but after allowing China to use Ream, also in the west and south (Hutt, 2022). Figure 1 depicts a map of the Ream Naval Base within the context of Southeast Asia (Yaacob, 2024) and illustrates how Vietnam found itself strategically surrounded by China after China's involvement in the development of the Ream Naval Base.

**Figure 1**

Source: Lowy Institute

Despite deep concerns and the risk of worsening relations with neighbouring countries and ASEAN allies, the new military dimension of Cambodia-China cooperation has had significant benefits for both parties. The choice of the Ream naval base to concentrate Chinese investment for development is not an accident but a deliberate strategic move. In this way, the core partners, Beijing and Phnom Penh, achieve their fundamental geopolitical and security targets regarding external threats: China is expanding its regional political influence, and Cambodia, in return, receives military support to resist possible aggression (Yaacob, 2024).

In addition to the apparent gains that Cambodia made from the cooperation and unconditional support of China, this entailed a number of systemic damages suffered by ASEAN in connection with Cambodia's suspected permission to use a military naval base. This is manifested in the fact that China's regional political strengthening leads to the undermining of the internal unity of the organisation and imbalance, because Vietnam and Thailand find this cooperation threatening to the security of their states.

BRI's impact on Cambodian foreign policy

The cases described in the previous chapters are evidence of the growing influence of China on Cambodia, which has a direct connection with the geopolitical situation of the entire region and the foreign policy framework of Phnom Penh. Speaking of levers of influence, we cannot ignore the Belt and Road Initiative, which has become a vital stage in the strengthening of economic and diplomatic ties between China and Cambodia.

The scale of the Belt and Road Initiative, due to its tremendous impact on the development of infrastructure and the economy, could not help but influence the foreign policy of the receiving country, Cambodia. As illustrated in Figure 2, before the launch of



the initiative in 2013, Cambodia was not a country marked by significant economic development or a successful infrastructure network; on the contrary, it was recognised as one of the weakest economies in the Southeast region (ASEAN Secretariat, 2014). The Chinese project made corrections to the existing deplorable situation and significantly changed the economic situation of Cambodia. Important points to note are the Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Expressway, which strategically links Phnom Penh with the country's essential seaport, as well as the reconstruction of the Siem Reap Angkor International Airport, which became a determining component in attracting the attention of international tourists and expanding the network of foreign flights. Thus, Cambodia's participation in the BRI has gained critical importance through the implementation of large-scale national initiatives (Manghout, 2021). At the same time, involvement in large-scale Chinese investment designs has reduced the independence of Cambodia's decisions at the international level, including the ASEAN framework.

Figure 2

Country	Total land area (sq km)	Total Population (thousand)	Gross Domestic Product (GDP)			
			at current prices		per capita	
			(US\$ Mn)	(PPP\$ Mn) ^{2/}	(US\$)	(PPP\$)
Brunei Darussalam	5,769	400	16,970	22,151	42,445	55,405
Cambodia	181,035	14,741	14,411	37,083	978	2,516
Indonesia	1,860,360	244,776	878,223	1,216,868	3,588	4,971
Lao PDR	236,800	6,514	9,083	18,921	1,394	2,904
Malaysia	330,290	29,337	305,154	501,079	10,338	16,975
Myanmar ^{1/}	676,577	60,976	52,525	90,907	861	1,490
Philippines	300,000	97,691	250,543	423,925	2,565	4,339
Singapore	716	5,312	276,610	326,506	52,069	61,461
Thailand	513,120	67,912	366,127	652,598	5,391	9,609
Viet Nam	330,958	88,773	141,669	329,034	1,596	3,706
ASEAN	4,435,624	616,614	2,311,315	3,619,072	3,748	5,869
CLMV ^{3/}	1,425,370	171,005	217,688	475,944	1,273	2,783
ASEAN6 ^{4/}	3,010,254	445,609	2,093,626	3,143,127	4,698	7,054

Source: ASEAN Community in figures

Cambodia's gains from Chinese investments is reflected in the rise of GDP from \$19.81B in 2013 to \$42.34B in 2023, an indicator that is steadily increasing, coinciding with the time period when China became the top investor in Cambodia and simultaneously the main trading partner, starting cooperation within the framework of the BRI in 2013 and RCEP and CCFTA later in 2022 (Macrotrends, 2023). However, Chinese investment in Cambodia continues to grow, reaching US\$1.378B in 2023, far surpassing the average annual Chinese investment from 2003 to 2023, which was US\$466.75M. The share of Chinese investment in total foreign investment in Cambodia in 2024 was 49.82%, making China the absolute leader in foreign capital in Cambodia, as well as securing the role of a major partner in trade, security, cultural, and political spheres (Sgueglia, 2025).



In 2024, Cambodia ranked first as the fastest-growing economy in Southeast Asia, overtaking the Philippines and Vietnam, as well as the third fastest-growing economy in Asia. (Khmer Times, 2024). This growth can be attributed, among other factors, to the kingdom's participation in the BRI, which has enabled the development of infrastructure, industrial zones, and production chains.

As already stated previously, Cambodia's enthusiastic acceptance of participation in the BRI initiative, in addition to all the obvious and direct advantages, provided an opportunity to deepen the already amiable and cooperative relations with China. Therefore, as an expression of regard and gratitude, Cambodia began to actively spread Chinese narratives, including defending Beijing's strategic interests in ASEAN. The successful application of the BRI project for China has led to growing, alarming concerns in ASEAN, which believes that such deep economic cooperation with China can lead to the fact that small ASEAN member countries can become subtle satellites of Beijing's interests, losing their voice. Another alarming cause for concern was the understanding that the value of ASEAN as a regional organisation lay precisely in unity and effective multilateral diplomatic cooperation, which is in direct danger if some ASEAN member countries ultimately fall under the dictates of China's interests. Thus, ASEAN could potentially lose its leading role in regional security and economic cooperation (Cheunboran, 2021).

In addition to the political destabilisation of the region and growing insecurity, the negative consequences of participation in the Belt and Road Initiative include devastating environmental damage and increasing Cambodia's foreign debt, but our main focus remains on how this infrastructure project forces Cambodia to follow geopolitical strategies and diplomatic interests of China, which is the largest investor and developmental partner. The ruling body of the government of Cambodia could not avoid criticism in connection with unconditional service to the political objectives of China's international policy and advocacy of their diplomatic goals in ASEAN and cooperation with other states. It can be concluded that Cambodia is ultimately moving into the sphere of Chinese domination, based on recent developments in the field of foreign policy, such as the official ban on raising the flag of Taiwan, constant and stable support in the South China Sea issues, as well as withdrawal from multiple programs based on cooperation with America, including military exercises (Heng & Po, 2017).

Thus, this chapter reveals that in addition to the indisputable benefits for Cambodia's economic situation, the BRI project resulted in significant security and ideological concerns of ASEAN due to the growing influence of China in the region and the strengthening of unequal cooperative relations with Cambodia. Such a statement has a number of consequences, namely loss of unity, reduction of independent collective decision-making, and regional significance of the organisation.

Balancing challenges and contributions within ASEAN

Cambodia is an ASEAN member country that can boast of its exceptionally important strategic geographical location in Southeast Asia. This is what makes the state a key player in the international arena, as well as an extremely important member of the



ASEAN organisation: Cambodia acts as a crucial link for ensuring the security, integration, and trade of other states of the regional bloc. The other side of the coin is Cambodia's foreign policy, which is characterised by close cooperation with China on multiple levels, including economic, diplomatic, and even military campaigns. As discussed in previous chapters, Cambodia's foreign policy decisions often prioritise Chinese strategic interests in Southeast Asia, and China's growing influence does not go unnoticed, shifting the balance of power and undermining ASEAN unity, which in turn excludes the adoption of collective security decisions.

The repeated situation with the promotion of Chinese narratives led to the fact that Cambodia's ASEAN partner countries were critical because such policies had a direct impact on the division of the unity of the organisation. Some of the countries, for example, Vietnam and Thailand, considered such close cooperation as a hostile gesture and a security threat. Thus, in 2020, the former permanent secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, Bilahari Kausikan, expressed his opinion that Cambodia's history in ASEAN may come to an end and the state may be excluded from the regional bloc, referring to the fact that such intensive interaction between China and Cambodia threatens the unity of the organisation and contributes to the lack of common direction in decision-making, for instance, as at the 2012 ASEAN Ministerial meeting (Strangio, 2020).

Phnom Penh rejects these objections and highlights that ASEAN membership is declared key to the kingdom's strategic development plan and emphasises the benefits that ASEAN receives from Cambodia's membership. A substantial contribution of Cambodia is the way its location and connecting potential have made the kingdom a key element of the East-West ASEAN Economic Corridor, contributing to the economic development and integration of the bloc's partner countries. Cambodia emphasises that to prioritise ASEAN, considerable efforts and resources have been devoted to the development of the economic corridor for the common benefit of ASEAN (Pich & Murg, 2020).

Although Cambodia was the last country to join ASEAN in 1991, it is argued that its contribution to the development of cooperation and the strengthening of relations between the countries was successful. It is known that in 2022, Cambodia held the ASEAN chairmanship, and it was during this period that it actively developed all spheres of activity of the block: trade and economic partnerships, investment, and political and diplomatic relations with other countries. During the one-year presidency of Cambodia in ASEAN, a number of designs aimed at the development of diplomatic and economic relations with countries worldwide were initiated, and special attention was paid to China and the United States of America. As stated, Cambodia has not openly declared allegiance to any of the named countries and seeks constructive and fruitful cooperation with both (Boros, 2022).

Despite the desired neutrality declared by Cambodia, it is obvious that the state is in need of multifaceted support from China. The support that Phnom Penh received from Beijing could not help but leave a mark on relations with the Western world and ASEAN partner countries. Mostly, this political and economic cooperation had negative consequences on the internal relations within the organisation, the unity of opinion of the members, and the ability to make common negotiated decisions. At the same time,



ASEAN has been declared the main direction of development for Cambodia, and activity in the organisation has its own valuable advantages. In fact, Phnom Penh is at the crossroads of open and transparent cooperation with China and productive activity in the regional organisation (Bunthorn, 2022).

Summing up the challenges and achievements of Cambodia as a member of ASEAN, it should be noted that the importance of the state as a geopolitical player is constantly growing due to the development and deepening of multidimensional economic cooperation with China and the concerns that it brings to the agenda of the regional organisation. The choice of the main directions of Cambodia's development has a direct impact on the geopolitical situation of Southeast Asia because the prioritisation and promotion of China's strategic interests in the region will lead to a shift of power and control, as well as to a change in the trajectory of development of other ASEAN countries, which they will be forced to follow as a result of Sino – Cambodian cooperation.

Conclusion

The paper's main goal is to analyse how the economic ties between China and Cambodia affect Cambodia's international political decisions. It can be concluded that the two countries' economic alliance directly influenced Cambodia's foreign policy, especially the settlement of regional issues such as the South China Sea and the failure to adopt a joint communique at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in 2012. Understanding the historical context of the development of bilateral Sino-Cambodian relations provides a comprehension of the dimensions in which the relationship acquired such a volume and importance that enabled China to increase its influence in the region.

The historical perspective sheds light on Chinese support dating back to the Khmer Rouge period, when Western assistance declined significantly for several reasons. At that time, China adopted a supportive position of the regime and acquired a loyal ally for the next decades until the deepening of bonds after the launch of the BRI project in 2013. The multidimensional cooperation between China and Cambodia is a complex web of strategic tools that China uses to enlist the support of its partners. This includes economic, investment, cultural, and diplomatic instruments that Cambodia welcomes to strengthen its regional position and security. Substantial investment-based funding has enabled China to have an ASEAN member ally that supports the One China Policy and a stance on the South China Sea issue and actively promotes this position on the organisation's agenda, which has a polarly opposite setting.

Another important indicator of the economic closeness of relations between China and Cambodia is the reconstruction and permission to use the Ream naval base, which is mutually beneficial for both sides and helps achieve security goals at the cost of unsecured relations with Vietnam and Thailand. Analysis of the BRI project as the case study did not reveal a direct impact on Cambodia's foreign policy decisions. However, it was a vivid example of a mechanism that led Cambodia to a more dependent economic position and the threat of a debt trap. It allowed Beijing to actively promote its narratives and state interests, using the advantageous status of the biggest economic partner.



In the context of the broader implications of the Sino-Cambodian economic coalition, it should be noted that Cambodia risks its sovereignty, state interests, and priorities by having a more limited ability to make independent decisions in the regional and global contexts. Undeniably, prioritising cooperation with China affected Cambodia's role in ASEAN. Despite the previously announced course of development along with ASEAN, cooperation with China, on the flip side, contradicts this statement and makes effective membership in the regional organisation impossible by undermining unity among member states, creating internal tensions, and fueling security conflicts.

Thus, the analysis of the historical perspective and the examination of the cases allowed us to closely inquire into the international politics of Cambodia, namely the activities in ASEAN, which coincide with the dynamic strengthening of cooperation with China in many spheres of political activity. Analysis of cases revealed that Cambodia's political decisions in the international arena often have a background that confirms that these decisions were made based on compliance with China's strategic interests. For example, blocking the adoption of a joint communique within the South China Sea dispute framework. Having the understanding of the specific mechanisms and instruments that influence the direction of Cambodia's foreign policy, in order to get a holistic overview of the consequences of Phnom Penh's deep economic cooperation with Beijing, one should focus on the long-term perspective and consequences of these bonds, as well as their global and regional effects, the domestic situation in Cambodia together with potential benefits and drawbacks.

Summing up, it is important to note that the long-term multidimensional and mainly economic cooperation between China and Cambodia has led to the reshaping of Cambodia's foreign policy strategy. The importance of this alliance lies not only in the prospects it brings for Cambodia's domestic politics but also in the stability of the regional political environment and ASEAN. The regional organisation and neighbouring countries of the Kingdom of Cambodia have growing security concerns, leading to the deterioration of relations and increasing pressure. Therefore, in order to achieve the maximum benefit from membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and bilateral relations with Beijing, Cambodia should develop balancing strategies between the two strategic directions of development without harming the activities of ASEAN as a unified bloc, besides not worsening relations with China as its leading investment partner.

References

- Boros, S. (2022). Cambodia's contributions to ASEAN since 1999. In *The Better Cambodia* [Online]. [Consulted on 30 December 2024]. Available at: <https://thebettercambodia.com/cambodias-contributions-to-asean-since-1999/>
- Bower, E. Z. (2012). China reveals its hand on ASEAN in Phnom Penh. In *Centre for Strategic & International Studies* [Online]. [Consulted on 5 January 2025]. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-reveals-its-hand-asean-phnom-penh>
- Bunthorn, K. (2021). 'Small state dilemma: Cambodia between the ASEAN and China in the Indo-Pacific context.' *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*. 1: 116–137. <https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2281116b>



Burgos, S., & Ear, S. (2010). 'China's strategic interests in Cambodia: Influence and resources.' *Asian Survey*. 50(3): 615–639. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2010.50.3.615>

Cambodia economic growth. (2023). In Macrotrends [Online].[Consulted on 25 September 2025]. Available at: <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/khm/cambodia/economic-growth-rate>

Cambodia, the fastest-growing economy in Southeast Asia, and third in Asia in 2024. (2024, April 8). In Khmer Times [Online].[Consulted on 25 September 2025]. Available at: <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501468871/cambodia-the-fastest-growing-economies-in-southeast-asia-and-third-in-asia-in-2024/>

Chen, S. A. (2018). The development of Cambodia–China relations and its transition under the OBOR initiative. *Chinese Economy*, 51(4), 370–382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10971475.2018.1457317>

Cheunboran, C. (2021). Cambodia's China strategy. Security Dilemmas of Embracing the Dragon. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429331534>

Chheang, V. (2021). Cambodia's multifaceted foreign policy and agency in the making. *The Pacific Review*, 35(2), 342–367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2021.1998203>

Ciorciari, John D., China and Cambodia: Patron and Client? (June 14, 2013). International Policy Centre Working Paper No. 121, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2280003>

Deth, S. U., Murg, B., Virak, O., & Renfrew, M. (2021). Cambodia 2040: International Relations and Governance. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Cambodia in collaboration with Future Forum.

Heng, K., & Po, S. (2017). Cambodia and China's Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities, challenges, and future directions. *UC Occasional Paper Series*, 1(2), 1-18

Hutt, D. (2022, June 30). Vietnam warily weighs a China base in Cambodia. In Asia Times [Online], 2022. [Consulted on 24.11.2024]. Available at: <https://asiatimes.com/2022/06/vietnam-warily-weighs-a-china-base-in-cambodia/>

Kurlantzick, J. (2006). China's charm offensive in Southeast Asia. *Current History*, 105(692), 270–276. <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2006.105.692.270>

Kunmakara, M. (2023, December 13). Cambodia leads FDI growth in Southeast Asia [Review of Cambodia leads FDI growth in Southeast Asia]. In The Nation, The Phnom Penh Post [Online]. 2023. [Consulted on 25.09.2025]. Available at: <https://www.nationthailand.com/pr-news/world/asean/40033756>

Manghout, K. (2024, December 4). Guest Opinion: China's BRI transforms infrastructure and development in Cambodia. In Xinhua [Online]. 2024. [Consulted on 24.11.2024]. Available at: <https://english.news.cn/20241204/ed29d179fec143b5aba45fc787909f1d/c.html>

Mingey, M., Parker, B., Zou, C., Gormley, L., & Marshall, H. (2023). ESG Impacts of China's Next-Generation Outbound Investments: Indonesia and Cambodia [Review of ESG Impacts of China's Next-Generation Outbound Investments: Indonesia and



Cambodia]. In *Rhodium Group* [Online]. 2023. [Consulted on 26.09.2025]. Available at: <https://rhg.com/>

Pheakdey, H. (2012). Cambodia-China Relations: a Positive-Sum Game? *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 31(2), 57–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810341203100203>

Pich, C., & Murg, B. J. (2020, November 2). Cambodia and ASEAN: Maintaining cooperation, building confidence. In *The Diplomat* [Online]. [Consulted on 29.12.2024]. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/cambodia-and-asean-maintaining-cooperation-building-confidence/>

Pissei, H. (2024, November 19). China accounts for nearly 30% of total trade in the first 10 months of 2024. In *The Phnom Penh Times* [Online]. [Consulted on 24.11.2024]. Available at: <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/china-accounts-for-nearly-30-of-total-trade-in-first-10-months-of-2024>

Po, S., & Primiano, C. B. (2020). An "Ironclad Friend": Explaining Cambodia's Bandwagoning Policy towards China. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 39(3), 444-464. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103420901879>

Samath, C. S. (2020). 'Cambodia's foreign policy strategy in a changing regional security architecture.' *AVI Perspective*, (No. 03).

Sgueglia, G. (2025, March 3). China-Cambodia Ties: Boosting Trade, Investment, and Opportunities. In *China Briefing* [Online]. [Consulted on 26.09.2025]. Available at: <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-cambodia-trade-investment-opportunities/>

Spadaccini, H., & Makornwattana, M. (2024, August 12). Chinese-funded Port Reawakens Thailand's Colonial Ghosts. In *Responsible Statecraft* [Online]. [Consulted on 24.11.2024]. Available at: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/cambodia-ream-naval-base-china/>

Strangio, S. (2020, October 29). Could ASEAN really cut Laos and Cambodia loose? In *The Diplomat* [Online]. [Consulted on 29.12.2024]. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/could-asean-really-cut-laos-and-cambodia-loose/>

Thul, M., & Tait. (2019, January 22). Cambodian Leader in Beijing says China pledges nearly \$600 million in aid. In *Reuters* [Online]. [Consulted on 05.01.2025]. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/cambodian-leader-in-beijing-says-china-pledges-nearly-600-million-in-aid-idUSKCN1PG0CY/>

ASEAN Secretariat. (2013). *ASEAN Community in Figures (ACIF) 2013*. ASEAN Secretariat. Available at: <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ACIF-2013.pdf>

Williamson, A. (2023). 'The Economic and Political Implications of China's Foreign Aid in Cambodia.' *Moussons: Recherches en sciences humaines sur l'Asie du Sud-Est*, 41, 133–150. <https://doi.org/10.4000/moussons.10476>

Yaacob, R. (2024, December 4). Partnership of Convenience: Ream Naval Base and the Cambodia-China convergence. In *Lowy Institute* [Online]. [Consulted on 16.12.2024].



Available at: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/partnership-convenience-ream-naval-base-cambodia-china-convergence>

FROM MERIT TO MIGHT: RETHINKING EU ENLARGEMENT IN LIGHT OF TÜRKIYE AND UKRAINE

SYLVIA TIRYAKI

tiryaki@bisla.sk

Associate Professor at Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts, Bratislava (Slovakia).

ORCID: 0009-0008-8709-7269

Abstract

This article examines the recent developments in the European Union's (EU) enlargement policy, arguing that the process has shifted from a primarily normative framework that prioritised democracy and economic integration to one increasingly influenced by geopolitics and security. Consequently, enlargement, a process historically characterised by its normative conditionality, has become a key instrument of strategic autonomy, and its credibility depends on reconciling the EU's foundational values with the urgency of security priorities. The present comparative case study of Türkiye and Ukraine analyses how geopolitical developments—particularly Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine—have forced the EU to reevaluate its priorities in the enlargement process. While Türkiye's decades-long accession trajectory has stalled as a result of political divergences and normative deficiencies, Ukraine's candidacy has been unprecedentedly fast despite war and economic fragility, highlighting the EU's shift towards geostrategic alignment. The study reveals a dual approach: fast-tracking candidates aligned with security imperatives while sidelining others despite longstanding candidate status. This raises critical questions about the coherence, credibility, and the role of normativity in the future of EU enlargement. The article concludes that sustaining the effectiveness of enlargement requires balancing geopolitical imperatives with the EU's foundational values.

Keywords

EU enlargement, geopolitics, Türkiye, Ukraine, strategic autonomy.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa os recentes desenvolvimentos na política de alargamento da União Europeia (UE), argumentando que o processo passou de um quadro principalmente normativo, que priorizava a democracia e a integração económica, para um quadro cada vez mais influenciado pela geopolítica e pela segurança. Consequentemente, o alargamento, um processo historicamente caracterizado pela sua condicionalidade normativa, tornou-se um instrumento fundamental de autonomia estratégica, e a sua credibilidade depende da conciliação dos valores fundamentais da UE com a urgência das prioridades de segurança. O presente estudo comparativo de caso da Turquia e da Ucrânia analisa como os desenvolvimentos geopolíticos — particularmente a invasão da Ucrânia pela Rússia em 2022 — forçaram a UE a reavaliar as suas prioridades no processo de alargamento. Enquanto a trajetória de adesão da Turquia, que se arrasta há décadas, estagnou como resultado de divergências políticas e deficiências normativas, a candidatura da Ucrânia foi excepcionalmente rápida, apesar da guerra e da fragilidade económica, destacando a



mudança da UE para um alinhamento geoestratégico. O estudo revela uma abordagem dupla: acelerar os candidatos alinhados com os imperativos de segurança, enquanto marginaliza outros, apesar do seu estatuto de candidatos de longa data. Isto levanta questões críticas sobre a coerência, a credibilidade e o papel da normatividade no futuro do alargamento da UE. O artigo conclui que, para manter a eficácia do alargamento, é necessário equilibrar os imperativos geopolíticos com os valores fundamentais da UE..

Palavras-chave

Alargamento da UE, geopolítica, Turquia, Ucrânia, autonomia estratégica.

How to cite this article

Tiryaki, Sylvia (2025). From Merit to Might: Rethinking EU Enlargement in Light of Türkiye and Ukraine. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 452-468. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.24>

Article submitted on 04th July 2025 and accepted for publication on 19th September 2025.





FROM MERIT TO MIGHT: RETHINKING EU ENLARGEMENT IN LIGHT OF TÜRKIYE AND UKRAINE

SYLVIA TIRYAKI

Introduction

Since its beginning, the EU has framed enlargement as a normative project that embodies its commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Candidate status was awarded to countries that met the Copenhagen criteria and had adopted the required reforms to align with EU standards. However, the geopolitical reality of the 2020s, most notably Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, necessitates a major reassessment of this normative model (Schwarz, 2025). It can be argued that enlargement has increasingly become a tool of geopolitics, shaped by security, energy resilience, and institutional stability.

This shift in priorities is especially visible in the accession trajectories of Türkiye and Ukraine, which are examined here as case studies due to their strategic significance, geopolitical context, and comparable size, despite differences in population and economic capabilities.¹ Türkiye, historically a critical NATO ally and an official EU candidate since 1999, exemplifies the normative model's limitations when strategic importance collides with internal reforms and ideological divergence. Ukraine, by contrast, demonstrates how geopolitical urgency—in this case, the threat to the European order—can override conventional progression logic.

Comparing these two countries is not new in the enlargement literature. Earlier studies, such as the monograph *EU Accession Prospects for Turkey and Ukraine: Debates in New Member States* edited by Piotr Kaźmirkiewicz (2006b), noted that Türkiye appeared institutionally closer to EU membership than Ukraine, which at the time remained outside the accession framework. Yet, the situation has shifted dramatically. While Türkiye's candidacy has stagnated, Ukraine's accession process has accelerated since 2022 despite war and institutional fragility. This reversal underscores the EU's transition from conditionality-driven integration to strategic, security-oriented expansion. Moreover, despite Türkiye's larger size, both countries pose comparable challenges to the EU's absorption capacity, as admitting either would necessitate extensive institutional reforms, particularly regarding unanimity in decision-making.

¹ The area of Ukraine is 603 550 km² and the area of Türkiye is 783 562 km². The population of Ukraine is estimated to be around 37 900 000, while population of Türkiye is more than double, at 85 372 377.



This article focuses on the EU's enlargement trajectory from 2005 to 2025, assessing how Türkiye's stagnation and Ukraine's acceleration reflect the shift from liberal-democratic conditionality to geopolitical consolidation. It explores how public opinion, bilateral agreements, and institutional discourse reinforce this reorientation, while considering underlying biases, such as Islamophobia, that, though less explicit in contemporary discourse, continue to shape perceptions of Türkiye's candidacy. The paper draws on the theoretical lens of geopolitical realism to situate enlargement within broader debates on power politics and strategic autonomy. The purpose of this study is not to evaluate which approach is preferable but to expose the nuances, tensions, and inconsistencies in the EU's evolving enlargement strategy and to consider their implications for the credibility and coherence of enlargement as both policy and identity.

Geopolitical Realism and the Strategic Turn in EU Enlargement

From the outset, EU enlargement was framed as a project of liberal order-building. The Commission's 2005 strategy document stated that its primary purpose was to "ensure security, stability and prosperity on its own continent and further afield," noting that "[a]ll European citizens benefit from having neighbours that are stable democracies and prosperous market economies," (Commission of the European Communities, 2005, p. 2). Security, in this conception, was the by-product of democratic transformation and market integration. Two decades later, this logic has been inverted: stability is no longer expected to emerge automatically from liberal conditionality but rather has become the primary rationale for enlargement itself.

Geopolitical realism

This article interprets this reversal through the lens of geopolitical realism, a framework increasingly applied in the analysis of EU foreign policy (Bosse, 2024; Osypchuk & Raik, 2023; Schimmelfennig, 2025; Schwarz, 2025; Zorić, 2025). Realism does not deny the importance of values, but it treats them as subordinate to survival, security, and power projection in an anarchic international environment. For much of its history, the EU has cultivated an image of itself as a normative power. Yet, when confronted with systemic shocks, its behaviour reveals realist logics and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was decisive in accelerating this realist turn.

Enlargement then becomes more than a reward for democracy. From 2025 onward, enlargement of the EU is a strategic calculation to secure borders, to anchor vulnerable states to the EU's institutional framework, and, most importantly, to deter rival powers. Despite its longstanding NATO membership, Türkiye's still valid candidacy and strategic importance illustrate the limitations of a purely normative model. Ukraine's rapid progression to candidacy, by contrast, demonstrates how geopolitical urgency takes precedence over concerns about institutional fragility or incomplete reforms.



Enlargement as a tool for strategic autonomy

The EU's recent discourse on "strategic autonomy" is the foundation of this recalibration. Initially reserved for issues of defence and energy self-sufficiency, strategic autonomy now extends to enlargement as well. The Draghi Report (2024), one of the most recent and extensive publications on the matter, has urged investments in defence industries, resilience to economic coercion, and closer security partnerships with regional actors. Enlargement is thus no longer treated as a distant teleological project, but as a pillar of strategic resilience. This logic is already embedded in initiatives such as the European Defence Industrial Strategy (European Commission, n.d.) and reiterated in political declarations, including the Granada Declaration (European Council, 2023). The release of the European Commission's White Paper for European Defence on 19 March 2025 only confirms that international security is currently a matter of the utmost importance on the EU agenda. According to the Paper, the EU pledges to pass legislation that will strengthen the EU's defence industry and create a defence market that will ensure that the EU is prepared for a worst-case security scenario by 2030. Moreover, the Paper includes several provisions for supporting Ukraine, including improved military mobility and infrastructure, and further integrating Ukraine into the EU's defence mechanisms. To achieve these aims by 2030, the ReARM Europe Plan has been introduced, and with it, up to EUR 800 billion of planned defence-related expenditures (European Commission, 2025a).

The criteria for enlargement have already shifted. While the Copenhagen benchmarks remain formally in place, greater weight is now attached to geopolitical alignment, reliability, and contributions to European security. In Türkiye's case, the real obstacle does not seem to lie only in democratic backsliding, but in a perceived divergence from EU strategic priorities. Ukraine, conversely, has been treated as indispensable to Europe's security architecture, despite the unfinished nature of its reform agenda. Thus, it can be argued that enlargement has been reconfigured as a mechanism to extend the EU's strategic autonomy to its neighbourhood (Borell, 2022; Draghi, 2024).

Using enlargement as strategic leverage

The realist reinterpretation is visible in the proliferation of bilateral and multilateral security agreements since the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Ukraine has concluded security cooperation treaties with nearly all EU member states, as well as Canada (*Agreement on Security Cooperation between Canada and Ukraine*, 2024), Norway (*Norway and Ukraine Sign Security Cooperation Agreement*, 2024), and the UK (*UK-Ukraine Agreement on Security Cooperation*, 2024). Türkiye, although sidelined institutionally, has also deepened its security networks: it has signed trade and defence agreements with Italy (*Turkey and Italy Strengthen Ties with Trade and Defense Agreements*, 2025), a strategic partnership and three agreements with Slovakia (*Türkiye and Slovakia Sign Declaration on Establishing Strategic Partnership and Three Agreements*, 2025), and trilateral naval cooperation with Romania and Bulgaria to counter mine threats in the Black Sea (*Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria to Cooperate in Mine Hunting*, 2024). Beyond Europe, Ankara has expanded its security footprint through twenty-four agreements with Pakistan (Rakipoğlu et al., 2025), thirteen bilateral agreements with Indonesia, including on co-production of



Bayraktar TB3 and AKINCI drones (Alpay, 2025), and a defence cooperation agreement with Syria (*Türkiye, Syria Sign Military Cooperation, Training Deal*, 2025).

These developments underscore a crucial point: enlargement is no longer solely about internal transformation of candidates, but also about their capacity to participate in Europe's emerging security order. By integrating Ukraine, the EU strengthens deterrence against Russia and anchors Kyiv within the Western liberal order. Thus, Türkiye's exclusion, as mentioned elsewhere, seems to reflect less its democratic shortcomings than persistent questions over strategic alignment and identity.

Institutional reforms needed

Treating enlargement as a security instrument, however, carries risks. Fast-tracking candidates for geopolitical reasons threatens to erode conditionality and undermine the legitimacy of the *acquis*. Ukraine's candidacy epitomises this dilemma: while its integration is regarded as essential European security, its reconstruction needs, economic fragility, and incomplete reforms raise difficult questions about absorption capacity (Besch & Ciaramella, 2023). For Türkiye, the opposite dynamic applies: strategic concerns, rather than normative shortcomings alone, explain the EU's reluctance to move forward.

A more layered model of conditionality is therefore emerging. Early stages emphasise foreign policy coordination and security alignment, while full *acquis* compliance and institutional reforms are deferred. This approach is evident in the Ukraine Facility and the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans (European Commission, 2024a, p. 2), and may soon be complemented by security compacts or defence pre-accession instruments that integrate candidate countries into the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

Yet enlargement as a strategic instrument cannot succeed without internal reform. The accession of Ukraine and other candidate countries would reshape voting dynamics, budgetary allocations, and institutional balances within the EU. Calls for extending qualified majority voting in foreign and security policy and for revising the EU's structural funds highlight the scale of these challenges (Csaky & Grant, 2025; Zorić, 2025).

Unless institutional reforms are enacted, strategic enlargement risks becoming either symbolically empty or hollow or destabilising in practice. The central challenge, therefore, is to reconcile the EU's dual identity—as a community of values and a geopolitical actor—so that future enlargements strengthen rather than dilute both its normative and strategic cohesion.

Methodology

This article employs a comparative case study approach (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2025) to analyse how geopolitical imperatives have reshaped the EU's enlargement policy. Türkiye and Ukraine are selected as the two focal cases. Both are large, geopolitically significant states with longstanding, yet remarkably different relationships with the EU. Türkiye has held official candidate status since 1999 and entered



negotiations in 2005, while Ukraine obtained candidate status in 2022 and began accession negotiations in 2024 (European Council, 2024).

The analysis draws on a broad base of primary and secondary sources. Core materials include official EU documents, policy papers, accession reports, summit conclusions and Eurobarometer surveys. These are complemented by national government publications, statements by international organisations and international agreements. In addition, scholarly literature, policy briefs, and reputable news sources are employed to provide context, particularly concerning the most recent developments in both countries. This methodology highlights how the recent geopolitical developments in the EU's neighbourhood have altered the significance it placed on conditionality, security, and strategic alignment during the enlargement process. By focusing on the chosen two countries, the aim of this paper is to analyse how factors such as institutional trajectories, bilateral partnerships, and public attitudes influence the EU's strategic recalibration toward geopolitical realism.

Normative Reconsideration and Strategic Adaptability

25 years ago, Türkiye's accession was among the key steps in the EU's enlargement strategy. It received candidate status in 1999 and formally opened negotiations in 2005. Today, it symbolises the EU's complex dilemma between upholding its foundational values and accommodating strategic imperatives. Türkiye's accession momentum gradually slowed after the coup attempt in 2016, and by 2025, negotiations were effectively frozen. What remains of what was supposed to be one of the most significant additions to the EU is a strategic ambivalence, with neither the EU nor Ankara willing to officially revoke Türkiye's candidate status.

The early phase of Türkiye's candidacy was viewed with optimism, and an effort was made to adopt reforms to make Türkiye aligned with the Copenhagen criteria. However, this trajectory reversed after 2013, and decisively so after the failed coup attempt of July 2016. The ensuing state of emergency allowed sweeping purges across the military, judiciary, academia, and media. Restrictions on freedom of expression and political pluralism drew international criticism, including Amnesty International's documentation of mass arrests and dismissals (Amnesty International, 2016).

The 2017 constitutional referendum further consolidated presidential powers, eroding parliamentary checks and balances. The Venice Commission (2017) warned that these amendments undermined the separation of powers and judicial independence. Subsequent European Commission progress reports from 2018 to 2024 consistently highlighted democratic backsliding, shrinking space for civil society, and weakened rule of law. The European Parliament reiterated these concerns in its May 2025 resolutions (European Parliament, 2025).

Despite periodic gestures of rapprochement —most recently the 2024 Gymnich meeting where both sides signalled interest in renewed dialogue (Council of the European Union, 2024)—no road map for accession talks has materialised. Instead, EU policy has shifted toward "functional engagement" with Türkiye as a valuable partner through selective cooperation on issues such as customs union modernisation, climate policy alignment,



and migration management, although without reference to full membership (European Commission, 2024b, 2025b).

Türkiye has become a liminal partner—too important to exclude, yet too divergent to integrate. Its stalled accession underscores both limits of conditionality when confronted with assertive sovereignty and the constraints of a meritocratic enlargement model in contexts shaped by identity politics and geopolitical ambivalence.

Ukraine's candidacy, by contrast, casts conditionality in a different light. Since gaining candidate status in 2022 and beginning negotiations in 2024, Ukraine has faced scrutiny over corruption, oligarchic influence, and judicial reform (Krupa, 2025). Yet, as Georg Vobruba (2025) observes, an urgency to solidify Ukraine's place in the European order required an alternative approach to the normative process. Taking a stance against Russian aggression immediately has moved concerns over incomplete reforms lower on the list of priorities.

However, this is not to say that the conditionality principle has been abandoned entirely. Rather, it represents a reconsideration of priorities for the foreseeable future. As Keil (2023) argues, a geopolitical approach to enlargement adds the geopolitical imperative as a factor in assessing the candidate's progress. It does not negate the original normative, values-based framework. Ukraine's trajectory represents this "sequenced conditionality," which places institutional reforms within a broader geopolitically-driven integration process. This enlargement framework prioritises alignment with EU security and foreign policy, as these have a global impact, while the more extensive national-level democratic and judicial reforms are to be adopted progressively once the situation becomes more stable.

Security Cooperation and Geopolitical Strategy

Türkiye's balancing act between strategic significance and normative misalignment places it at a critical juncture in EU enlargement politics. Despite divergences, Türkiye remains indispensable to the EU, playing pivotal roles in migration management, regional security in the Eastern Mediterranean, and energy transit. Its expanding defence industry, especially the internationally lauded Bayraktar UAVs, further strengthens its appeal (Çelik, 2021; Franke, 2025; Witt, 2022).

From the EU's perspective, however, this strategic utility has not translated into renewed accession momentum. Key member states, notably France and Austria, remain sceptical, citing governance concerns but also cultural apprehensions regarding Türkiye's predominantly Muslim identity and demographic weight (Handy, 2023).

Concurrently, Türkiye has recalibrated its external posture by diversifying alliances beyond the Euro-Atlantic framework. In 2024, it applied for BRICS membership (*Turkey seeks to join the BRICS bloc of emerging economies, a Kremlin official says, 2024*) and was granted "partner country" status (*BRICS offers Turkey 'partner country' status, Turkish trade minister says, 2024*). Ankara has also deepened ties with non-Western powers, including China through renewed currency swap arrangements (Central Bank of the Republic of Türkiye, 2025), Russia (Avcıoğlu, 2025), Pakistan (Rakipoğlu et al., 2025), and Indonesia (Alpay, 2025). It has also renewed relations with the Arab League



and generally focused its foreign policy on bilateral defence and trade agreements. While not necessarily precluding continued cooperation with the EU, these moves do signal Ankara's intent to decrease Türkiye's dependence on the EU. Notably, Türkiye's interest in BRICS and its increasing involvement in such platforms indicate a shift to transactional diplomacy, prioritising autonomy and pragmatic cooperation over long-term normative integration. This strategic reorientation has rendered Türkiye's candidate status a symbolic gesture, further complicating EU-Türkiye relations.

Because Ukraine's accession has been motivated by an unprecedented security crisis, it necessitates an unprecedented exception. While the Copenhagen criteria—democratic governance, market economy, and *acquis communautaire* compliance—are traditionally used to evaluate candidates, Ukraine's extraordinary circumstances of Russia's full-scale invasion launched in February 2022 have prompted the EU to reframe enlargement as an instrument of geopolitical resilience. Consequently, Ukraine has become a "test case" for a security-centric approach to accession, which allows for certain flexibility of normativity.

The strategic rationale behind Ukraine's candidacy is increasingly rooted in its frontline status in the defence of Europe's post-Cold War security order. Following the invasion, EU rhetoric shifted from procedural conditionality to solidarity, asserting Ukraine's membership as a *de facto* security guarantee in a context where NATO enlargement remains stalled (Besch & Ciaramella, 2023).

This shift was institutionalised by the European Council's decision to grant Ukraine candidate status in June 2022 (Polityuk & Hnidiy, 2022) and to open accession negotiations in 2024 (European Council, 2024). Although Ukraine remains a state at war, its integration has been legitimised through appeals to resilience, sacrifice, and perceived European identity. Furthermore, its contribution to European defence—especially in cyber-security and unmanned systems—reinforces its standing within Europe's strategic architecture (Braun et al., 2024).

Economy or Strategy?

One of the most contentious aspects of Ukraine's candidacy lies in its economic implications. According to the World Bank, Ukraine's reconstruction needs are estimated at \$524 billion (World Bank, 2025), with EU contributions since 2022 already exceeding €186 billion (Administration Team of the EU Delegation to the United States, 2025). These commitments have provoked debate over fiscal solidarity, budgetary priorities, and public support across member states.

Yet the prevailing narrative increasingly frames Ukraine not as an economic liability but as a strategic investment in European resilience. Ukraine's vast agricultural base, critical raw materials, and gas reserves offer pathways to reduce EU dependence on third-country suppliers (Tombiński, 2023). Its alignment with EU energy, digital and transport policies also promises to enhance the Union's long-term competitiveness. This vision of complementarity has sustained political will, even amid enlargement fatigue and growing populist backlash.



Türkiye, while sidelined in terms of formal accession, remains deeply embedded in the EU's economic and strategic orbit. Despite frozen negotiations, Ankara continues to seek visa liberation² and the modernisation of the Customs Union, which has been in force since 1995. In practice, EU-Türkiye relations have evolved into a selective partnership, with cooperation in trade, migration, counterterrorism, public health, climate, energy, transport, and regional security (European Commission, 2024a, 2024b). Trade ties remain robust. In 2022, Türkiye ranked as the EU's seventh-largest trading partner, accounting for 3.3% (EUR 198.33 billion) of the EU's total goods trade. This share increased to 4.1% (EUR 206 billion) in 2023 (European Commission, 2023, p. 131, 2024b, pp. 4, 48). By late 2024, EU reports reiterated that Türkiye's importance in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern stability, as well as its economic potential to bolster EU competitiveness.

The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) has further highlighted Türkiye's defence industry, noting its capacity to produce cost-effective unmanned systems, precision-guided munitions, and electronic warfare tools as an asset to Europe's security posture, especially given the ongoing war in Ukraine (Kurç et al., 2024). Some tentative warming in political dialogue was evident at the already mentioned Gymnich meeting in 2024, where both sides reaffirmed interest in re-engagement.

Credibility Questioned: Public Opinion, Identity, and Enlargement Politics

Public opinion has long functioned as both a mirror and a constraint on the European Union's enlargement strategy. While officially presented as a technocratic process centred on compliance with the Copenhagen criteria, enlargement has always been politically contingent – shaped by domestic electorates in member states (Zorić, 2025). As Kaźmierkiewicz (2006a, pp. 25–27) noted two decades ago, support or opposition to candidate countries often aligns with public perceptions of their nationals, shaped by cultural ties, linguistic proximity, diasporas, and economic reputation. Elite consensus may drive formal decisions, but sustained popular support is essential for legitimacy and viability. The widening gap between strategic imperatives and public sentiment has thus emerged as a critical variable in the Union's external engagement.

The Eurobarometer data have consistently highlighted significant variation in public support for candidate countries. Early surveys from 2006 already showed a marked preference for EFTA states, such as Norway, Switzerland, and Iceland, that were perceived culturally and economically proximate, whereas Türkiye and Albania received far lower approval (Standard Eurobarometer 64, 2006, p. 137). Two enduring explanatory dimensions account for this divergence: cultural-religious affinity and economic perception.

The first dimension, cultural-religious identity, has been theorised as “bounded Europeanism,” wherein support for enlargement depends on perceived civilisational

² On 18 July 2025, the EU eased rules for Turks to use its open-border Schengen area. This means that Turks now will be eligible for a six-month visa, as well as one-year, three-year and five-year multiple-entry visas (*EU Eases Schengen Visa Rules for Turks; Envoy Urges Further Moves*, 2025).



compatibility. This has been particularly salient in attitudes towards Türkiye. As a predominantly Muslim country, Türkiye's candidacy has often triggered anxieties about Europe's cultural coherence, especially in countries with entrenched Christian heritage narratives (Kaźmierkiewicz, 2006a). The second was the economy. Wealthier states such as Norway and Switzerland were viewed favourably, while poorer candidates received less support. Interestingly, Ukraine, despite its weaker economy, ranked ahead of states with Muslim populations, suggesting that cultural-religious identity weighed more heavily than economic capacity in public perceptions (Kaźmierkiewicz, 2006a, p. 19). Other economically poorer nations, such as Serbia, also attracted relatively less resistance (Kaźmierkiewicz, 2006a, p. 19).

This pattern persists in more recent data, as the IPSOS survey for *Euronews* confirms that Ukraine enjoys significantly more public support for accession (45%) than Türkiye (24%), despite its current military and economic fragility (Cantone, 2024). Although the GDP of Türkiye is USD 1.44 trillion and the GDP of Ukraine is USD 205.74 billion as of April 2025 (*GDP per Capita, Current Prices, 2025*), Türkiye's large economy has not translated into higher support. Ukraine, despite its war-induced economic collapse, benefits from a narrative of solidarity and security rather than economic self-sufficiency.

There also seems to be a new trend emerging. According to the 2025 European Parliament Winter Survey, 66% of respondents identified the EU's protective role amid global insecurity, and 36% named defence and security as top policy areas (*EP Winter 2025 Survey - Results Annex, 2025*). These trends suggest that public opinion—once primarily reactive to economic fears and cultural stereotypes—is being reshaped by a heightened awareness of security interdependence and that enlargement is no longer perceived merely as a technocratic process. It ranks now as the second most important action to strengthen the EU's global role, following only the euro, and ahead of defence.

Conclusion

This article has examined the evolving character of EU enlargement policy, tracing the shift from a primarily normative process of democratic and economic transformation to one where geopolitical strategy, security and resilience increasingly take priority. The comparative analysis of Türkiye and Ukraine, two large, strategically significant, but differently politically positioned candidate countries, has demonstrated that enlargement no longer functions exclusively for its original purpose of promoting democracy. It has also become an essential mechanism for protecting stability in the region and enhancing the EU's strategic autonomy.

Türkiye's trajectory demonstrates the limitations of conditionality. Once envisioned as the point where Europe meets the Muslim world, its accession process has stalled due to serious democratic backsliding and normative divergence, resulting in mutual ambivalence. Its gradual yet undeniable reorientation toward alternative geopolitical frameworks such as BRICS and closer ties with Russia, China, and the Arab League signal its pivot to a transactional, multipolar diplomacy. Yet the relationship with the EU remains too important for both parties—economically, militarily, and geographically—to be severed entirely.



Conversely, Ukraine's candidacy under exceptional circumstances places geopolitics and security at the top of the EU's enlargement agenda. It emphasises the necessity of binding Ukraine to the EU in order to protect its eastern border and deter further acts of aggression from Russia. Ukraine has thus become the first candidate where the new security-driven model of enlargement is being applied. Whether Ukraine becomes an EU member, however, will depend on multiple factors, including the resolution of the war and subsequent post-war reconstruction, institutional reforms, and sustained public and fiscal solidarity across the EU.

Public opinion in particular will be the decisive factor in Ukraine's integration. As the comparison over two decades shows, cultural and religious perceptions remain virtually unchanged since the earliest surveys: Türkiye continues to face opposition driven by identity and political arguments, while Ukraine's accession is seen as an existential necessity, supported by official expressions of solidarity. The persistence of these asymmetries highlights that democratic societies of the EU will not sustain enlargement policies that are culturally selective or normatively inconsistent.

The main argument that has been developed in this paper is that while enlargement used to be the EU's most powerful instrument of liberal teleology in the past, it is now being repurposed as a cornerstone of its strategic autonomy. Yet this shift is not without risks and requires careful balancing. If security imperatives take precedence over democratic conditionality long-term, the EU risks disregarding the very principles and values that underlie its legitimacy. To be sustainable, future enlargement must therefore balance strategic resilience and foundational values. This requires a different approach to the accession process. The early stages would focus on security, economic convergence, and sectoral integration, while democratic governance and rule of law remain the end goal.

In conclusion, Türkiye and Ukraine exemplify two divergent but complementary trajectories to EU membership. Türkiye represents the EU's struggle to integrate a large, Muslim-majority state whose democratic credentials and rule of law have deteriorated, yet its strategic value remains too important to lose. Ukraine represents what seems to be the future of enlargement, a new model characterised by a reconsideration of priorities, resulting in an accelerated accession due to geopolitical urgency. Both cases present a central normative lesson: candidates must be assessed based on the same criteria, regardless of religion or identity. Türkiye should not be excluded simply because it is Muslim, nor should Ukraine be integrated without a credible path to democratic consolidation because it is at war. To do otherwise is to compromise the meritocratic nature of the accession process.

The future of enlargement thus lies in a hybrid paradigm, based on foundational values yet guided by interests. If the process remains strategically sensible and normatively just, the EU will be able to maintain its transformational capacity and position itself as a key player in the multipolar international order. When viewed through this new lens, the enlargement process is about more than just membership; it is also about defining Europe's strategic future



References

- Administration Team of the EU Delegation to the United States. (2025, 21 February). In *EU assistance to Ukraine (in U.S. Dollars)*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/united-states-america/eu-assistance-ukraine-us-dollars_en?s=253
- Agreement on security cooperation between Canada and Ukraine. (2024, 23 February). In the Government of Canada. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/response_conflict-reponse_conflits/crisis-crisis/agreement-ukraine-accord.aspx?lang=eng
- Alpay, E. K. (2025). Türkiye and Indonesia sign landmark agreements in defence, media. In *TRT World*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/turkiye-and-indonesia-sign-landmark-agreements-in-defence-media-18264301>
- Amnesty International. (2016, 18 July). Turkey: Human rights in grave danger following coup attempt and subsequent crackdown. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2016/07/turkey-human-rights-in-grave-danger-following-coup-attempt-and-subsequent-crackdown/>
- Avcıoğlu, M. (2025, June 27). Türkiye signs economic cooperation protocol with Russia. In AA. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/turkiye-signs-economic-cooperation-protocol-with-russia/3615427>
- Besch, S., & Ciaramella, E. (2023, 24 October). Ukraine's accession poses a unique conundrum for the EU. In *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/10/ukraines-accession-poses-a-unique-conundrum-for-the-eu?lang=en>
- Borell, J. (2022, 27 June). The geopolitical imperative for the EU is to both widen and deepen. In the *European Union External Action*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/geo-political-imperative-eu-both-widen-and-deepen_en
- Bosse, G. (2024, 21 May). Has the EU really become geopolitical? Rethinking the security-values nexus in EU enlargement. In the *European Democracy Hub*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/has-the-eu-really-become-more-geopolitical/>
- Braun, M., Metodieva, A., Halás, M., Šitera, D., & Laryš, M. (2024). *The Future of EU Enlargement in a Geopolitical Perspective*. Institute of International Relations Prague. <https://www.iir.cz/en/the-future-of-eu-enlargement-in-a-geopolitical-perspective-1>
- BRICS offers Turkey 'partner country' status, Turkish trade minister says. (2024, 14 November). In *AI Monitor*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/11/brics-offers-turkey-partner-country-status-turkish-trade-minister-says>



Cantone, S. (2024, 4 April). EU voters say yes to Ukraine's accession, exclusive poll finds. In *Euronews*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/04/04/majority-of-eu-voters-in-favour-of-ukraine-joining-the-eu-exclusive-ipsos-euronews-poll-fin>

Çelik, H. K., Sinem. (2021). 'The role of Turkish drones in Azerbaijan's increasing military effectiveness: An assessment of the second Nagorno-Karabakh war.' *Insight Turkey*, (23):4. <https://www.insightturkey.com/articles/the-role-of-turkish-drones-in-azerbajians-increasing-military-effectiveness-an-assessment-of-the-second-nagorno-karabakh-war>

Central Bank of the Republic of Türkiye. (2025, 13 June). Central Bank of the Republic of Türkiye and People's Bank of China renew bilateral currency swap arrangement. In *Türkiye Cumhuriyet Merkez Bankası*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.tcmb.gov.tr/wps/wcm/connect/EN/TCMB+EN/Main+Menu/Announcements/Press+Releases/2025/ANO2025-36>

Commission of the European Communities. (2005). *Communication from the Commission—2005 enlargement strategy paper*. Document 52005DC0561. European Union. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52005DC0561>

Council of the European Union. (2024). *Informal meeting of foreign affairs ministers—Gymnich*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2024/02/02-03/>

Csaky, Z., & Grant, C. (2025). Does EU enlargement require voting reform? In *Centre for European Reform*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.cer.eu/insights/does-eu-enlargement-require-voting-reform>

Draghi, M. (2024). *The future of European competitiveness – In-depth analysis and recommendations*. European Commission. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/strengthening-european-competitiveness/eu-competitiveness-looking-ahead_en

EP Winter 2025 Survey—Results Annex. (2025). In the European Union. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3492>

EU Eases Schengen Visa Rules for Turks; Envoy Urges Further Moves. (2025, 18 July). In *Reuters*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/eu-eases-schengen-visa-rules-turks-envoy-urges-further-moves-2025-07-18/>

European Commission. (n.d.). *EDIS: Our common defence industrial strategy*. European Commission. https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/edis-our-common-defence-industrial-strategy_en

European Commission. (2023). *Türkiye report 2023*. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/turkiye-report-2023_en

European Commission. (2024a). *2024 Communication on EU enlargement policy*. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2024-communication-eu-enlargement-policy_en



European Commission. (2024b). *Türkiye report 2024*. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/turkiye-report-2024_en

European Commission. (2025a, 12 March). *Introducing the White Paper for European Defence and the ReArm Europe Plan-Readiness 2030*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/introducing-white-paper-european-defence-and-rearm-europe-plan-readiness-2030_en

European Commission. (2025b, 28 July). *Joint statement by Turkish Foreign Minister H.E. Hakan Fidan and EU Commissioner for Enlargement H.E. Marta Kos following their meeting in Istanbul*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-statement-turkish-foreign-minister-he-hakan-fidan-and-eu-commissioner-enlargement-he-marta-kos-2025-07-28_en

European Council. (2023, 6 October). *The Granada declaration*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/10/06/granada-declaration/>

European Council. (2024, 25 June). *EU opens accession negotiations with Ukraine*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/06/25/eu-opens-accession-negotiations-with-ukraine/>

European Parliament. (2025, 7 May). *Texts adopted—Wednesday, 7 May 2025*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-05-07_EN.html#sdocta16

Franke, U. (2025, 10 January). *Drones in Ukraine: Four lessons for the West*. In the *European Council on Foreign Relations*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://ecfr.eu/article/drones-in-ukraine-four-lessons-for-the-west/>

GDP Per Capita, Current Prices. (2025). In the International Monetary Fund. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPDPC@WEO>

George, A. L., & Bennett, A. (2005). *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*. MIT Press.

Handy, N. (2023, 2 September). *This is why Turkey won't make it into the EU*. In *Fair Observer*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. <https://www.fairobserver.com/world-news/turkey-news/this-is-why-turkey-wont-make-it-into-the-eu/>

Kaźmierkiewicz, P. (2006a). "Central European debates on further enlargement." In P. Kaźmierkiewicz (ed), *EU Accession prospects for Turkey and Ukraine: Debates in new member states*. Institute of Public Affairs, pp. 13–47.

Kaźmierkiewicz, P, (ed). (2006b). *EU accession prospects for Turkey and Ukraine: Debates in new member states*. Institute of Public Affairs.

Keil, S. (2023). *Enlargement politics based on geopolitics? A proposal for a geopolitics-driven enlargement policy*. In J. Džankić, S. Kacarska, & S. Keil (eds), *A year later, war*



in Ukraine and Western Balkan (geo)politics, European University Institute, pp. 117–124.
<https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2870/275946>

Krupa, J. (2025, 23 July). EU demands 'explanations' on Ukrainian reforms and says there 'cannot be a compromise' on corruption – as it happened. In *The Guardian*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2025/jul/23/europe-latest-news-updates-ukraine-corruption-zelenskyy-russia>

Kurç, Ç., Egeli, S., Mevlütoğlu, A., & Güvenç, S. (2024). *Türkiye's defence industry: Which way forward?* The International Institute for Strategic Studies. <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2024/11/turkiyes-defence-industry-which-way-forward/>

Norway and Ukraine Sign Security Cooperation Agreement. (2024, 31 May). In Government.no; [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/norway-and-ukraine-sign-security-cooperation-agreement/id3041413/>

Osypchuk, A., & Raik, K. (2023, 8 November). The EU's geopolitical enlargement. In *Istituto Affari Internazionali*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/c25/eus-geopolitical-enlargement>

Polityuk, P., & Hnidy, V. (2022, 24 June). EU grants Ukraine candidate status in 'historic moment'. In *Reuters*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/ukraine-becomes-eu-membership-candidate-battle-east-enters-fearsome-climax-2022-06-23/>

Rakipoğlu, Z., Demir, I., & Nisa Cebi, G. (2025, 13 February). Türkiye, Pakistan sign 24 cooperation agreements to strengthen bilateral ties. In AA. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/turkiye-pakistan-sign-24-cooperation-agreements-to-strengthen-bilateral-ties/3481013>

Schimmelfennig, F. (2025). "Geopolitical enlargement." In M. Jopp & J. Pollak (eds), *The European Union's geopolitics. The Future of Europe* Springer Nature Switzerland, pp. 79–98.

Schwarz, O. (2025). Russia's war against Ukraine: A geopolitical turning point for EU enlargement? *European Journal of Risk Regulation*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/err.2025.21>

Standard Eurobarometer 64. (2006). European Union. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/833>

Tombiński, J. (2023). The European Union is better off with Ukraine as a member. In *GLOBSEC*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/european-union-better-ukraine-member>

Turkey and Italy Strengthen Ties with Trade and Defense Agreements. (2025, 29 April). In AP News. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://apnews.com/article/italy-turkey-trade-defense-partnerships-8843d7e63deef4c2a38c33490a54ea30>



Turkey Seeks to Join the BRICS Bloc of Emerging Economies, a Kremlin Official Says. (2024, 4 September). In AP News. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://apnews.com/article/russia-turkey-brics-bloc-developing-economies-525b68836de1301187c5805ead872b65>

Türkiye and Slovakia Sign Declaration on Establishing Strategic Partnership and Three Agreements. (2025, 20 January). In the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, Directorate of Communications. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <http://wt.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/turkiye-and-slovakia-sign-declaration-on-establishing-strategic-partnership-and-three-agreements/>

Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria to Cooperate in Mine Hunting. (2024, 1 July). In TurDef Global Defence News. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://turdef.com/article/turkiye-romania-and-bulgaria-to-cooperate-in-mine-hunting>

Türkiye, Syria Sign Military Cooperation, Training Deal. (2025, 13 August). In Daily Sabah. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/turkiye-syria-sign-military-cooperation-training-deal/news>

UK-Ukraine Agreement on Security Cooperation. (2024, 12 January). In GOV.UK. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-ukraine-agreement-on-security-co-operation>

Venice Commission. (2017). *Turkey - Opinion on the amendments to the constitution adopted by the Grand National Assembly on 21 January 2017 and to be submitted to a national referendum on 16 April 2017.* Document No. CDL-AD(2017)005. Council of Europe. [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2017\)005](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2017)005)

Vobruba, G. (2025, 4 June). Mission almost impossible: Dilemmas of a southern and eastern enlargement of the European Union. In *Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.oegfe.at/policy-briefs/mission-almost-impossible-dilemmas-of-a-southern-and-eastern-enlargement-of-the-european-union/>

Witt, S. (2022, 9 May). The Turkish drone that changed the nature of warfare. In *The New Yorker*. [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/05/16/the-turkish-drone-that-changed-the-nature-of-warfare>

World Bank. (2025, 25 February). *Updated Ukraine recovery and reconstruction needs assessment released.* [Online]. [Accessed 16.9.2025]. Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/02/25/updated-ukraine-recovery-and-reconstruction-needs-assessment-released>

Yin, R. K. (2025). *Case study research and applications* (Sixth). Sage.

Zorić, B. (2025, 19 June). EU enlargement and integration: Voices of support and scepticism. In the *European Union Institute for Security Studies*.

THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF ISLAMIC UNITY IN THE AGE OF NATION-STATES: THE MUSLIM WORLD, THE CALIPHATE, AND THE ORGANISATION OF ISLAMIC COOPERATION

ERDAL KURĞAN

erdal.kurgan@marmara.edu.tr

Assistant Professor at Marmara University, Institute of Middle East and Islamic Countries
(Turkey). <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6668-2804>

Abstract

The global expansion of Western hegemony in the 19th century and thereafter engendered profound crises in the Muslim World, as it did in every region that established relations with the West. This article evaluates the political, economic, and cultural unity efforts in the post-colonial Muslim World, focusing on the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). It analyses the structural and external factors characterising the contemporary situation of the Muslim World within the context of civilisational interaction. The central argument of this analysis is that an interconnected Muslim World has always existed, but that its efforts towards Ittihad-i Islam (Islamic Unity) through the OIC in the post-Caliphate era and the age of nation-states have been constrained by local and global limitations. However, it further suggests that these constraints do not constitute a historical block and that overcoming them remains possible within the context of Muslim populations.

Keywords

Muslim World, Caliph, OIC, Islamic Unity.

Resumo

A expansão global da hegemonia ocidental no século XIX e posteriormente gerou crises profundas no mundo muçulmano, assim como em todas as regiões que estabeleceram relações com o Ocidente. Este artigo avalia os esforços de unidade política, económica e cultural no mundo muçulmano pós-colonial, com foco na Organização da Cooperação Islâmica (OCI). Analisa os fatores estruturais e externos que caracterizam a situação contemporânea do mundo muçulmano no contexto da interação civilizacional. O argumento central desta análise é que sempre existiu um mundo muçulmano interligado, mas que os seus esforços em direção à Ittihad-i Islam (Unidade Islâmica) através da OIC na era pós-califado e na era dos Estados-nação foram limitados por restrições locais e globais. No entanto, sugere ainda que estas limitações não constituem um obstáculo histórico e que é possível superá-las no contexto das populações muçulmanas.

Palavras-chave

Mundo Muçulmano, Califa, OIC, Unidade Islâmica.



How to cite this article

Kurğan, Erdal (2025). The Conceptualisation of Islamic Unity in the Age of Nation-States: The Muslim World, the Caliphate, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations, VOL. 16, N^o. 2, TD1, December 2025, pp. 469-491. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0525.25>

Article submitted on 02nd July 2025 and accepted for publication on 21st October 2025.





THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF ISLAMIC UNITY IN THE AGE OF NATION-STATES: THE MUSLIM WORLD, THE CALIPHATE, AND THE ORGANISATION OF ISLAMIC COOPERATION

ERDAL KURĞAN

Introduction

The forms of social togetherness are subject to change and transformation throughout historical processes. This togetherness, which does not occur in absolute fixity, is shaped in relation to geography, history, and the socio-cultural context emerging from historical experience. Furthermore, the relationships that societies establish with those who are different contribute to and shape the social reality. While some influences can be evaluated as directly positive contributions, situations that push one towards a negative stance or position also represent contributions in the long run, albeit as a 'negative effect'. People, cultures, or, on a larger scale, civilisations constantly influence each other, contributing to the human experience. These mutual interactions and contributions become much more intensive and rapid during periods of increased transportation and communication. However, these effects do not yield the same outcome for all parties involved in the relationship. In some cases, one party tends to establish dominance over the other, imposing its influence as a unidirectional relationship, as exemplified by the global spread of Western hegemony in the 19th century and beyond (Wallerstein 1974). This article evaluates the political, economic, and cultural unity efforts in the post-colonial Muslim World, centring on the OIC. It analyses the structural and external factors characterising the contemporary situation of the Muslim World within the context of civilisational interaction. The core assertion of this analysis is that the efforts towards *Ittihad-i Islam* realised through the OIC in the post-Caliphate era and the age of nation-states are limited due to local and global constraints. Nevertheless, it proposes that these constraints are not a historical block and that it is plausible for Muslim peoples to overcome them.

In this context, in light of the foregoing, I will first problematise the notion of the 'Muslim World' and discuss its feasibility. This discussion is anchored in Cemil Aydın's work, *The Idea of the Muslim World*, which explores whether an 'Idea of the Muslim World' existed in the 119th-century context. The debate over the Muslim World is important because it implies a political, economic, military, and cultural body beyond a mere geographical designation. I follow the trajectory of *The Idea of the Muslim World* in making this implication, but with one distinction: I argue that Aydın's fundamental claim occasionally



contains anachronistic and retrospective assumptions and that certain points he expected to exist but did not find, or claimed were non-existent but overlooked, should be interpreted differently. I contend that the reading I propose will render the 19th and 20th-century Muslim World more intelligible, thus making it easier to perceive the historical conditions and conceptualisations under which the expectation of a Caliphate became possible.

Following the examination of the conceptualisation of the Muslim World, I will address the Caliphate and its manifestations in historical experience during the early modern period. In doing so, I will attempt to distinguish the conceptualisation of the Caliphate in the post-Caliphate period from the practical experiences and the meaning ascribed to it. This will facilitate an easier analytical comprehension of the relationship between the late-colonial-era understanding of the Muslim World and its practical notion of the Caliphate.

After addressing the conceptualisation of the Muslim World and the issue of the Caliphate, I will examine the establishment of the contemporary global order in the absence of the Caliphate and the OIC as an outcome of the Muslim World-Caliphate conceptualisation within that order. In the conclusion, I will critically assess the effectiveness and strength of the OIC in its efforts to resolve both the internal problems and the external challenges of the Muslim World in the absence of the Caliphate, thus concluding the article.

The Muslim World

Approximately one-fifth of the world's population today is Muslim (Aydın 2017, p. 1). Muslims can be encountered in many parts of the world, from the Siberian deserts to the canyons of North America, from the Amazon in South America to the depths of Africa. When asked about their thoughts regarding other people who define themselves as Muslim, you may witness them expressing that they do not see them as separate from themselves and that they share a common bond. It is even possible to observe some discussing this perception of commonality with an ideal of universal and monolithic unity. In this context, it suffices to cite the examples of transnational aid associations/foundations and the many Muslims of different nationalities working as volunteers there, or Muslims who travel to conflict zones despite the danger of death to assist Muslims in those areas. However, can one speak of a unified entity encompassing the political, military, and cultural unity of all Muslims in historical experience? Or can one speak of a Muslim World—a shared destiny—bound by the collective past and future perceptions of Muslims? Cemil Aydın answers this question with a 'no' in his work, *The Idea of the Muslim World*, a product of intensely focused intellectual and historical effort (Aydın 2017).

Aydın, seeking an answer to the question 'What is the Muslim World?', offers a negative reply regarding the existence of such a world, citing the late-19th-century political choices motivated by anti-Westernism. However, upon careful examination of the arguments for this answer, it is evident that Aydın's readily given response fails in some respects to escape being anachronistic and retrospective. The arguments in question, which we will analyse in detail below, can be grouped under the following headings: i-



Muslims do not represent a homogeneous sociality, ii- Muslims do not have a monolithic political unity, iii- the notion of the Muslim World was born out of the assumption of a monolithic Western image, iv- in the pre-modern era, the belief in unity and the concept of *Ummah* were practically absent among Muslim societies, v- the idea of the Muslim World emerged as a prescription for salvation under colonial domination, and finally vi- the pluralistic administrations of cosmopolitan rulers in Islamic history differed from the conceptualisation of the Muslim World. Each of these arguments represents assumptions that are addressed in different debates, especially by Islamist political or intellectual actors. These argumentative questions directed at actors who propose and demand transnational movements or ideals of political unity significantly influence the search for unity and the ability of Muslims to act collectively in the post-Caliphate era.

Aydın argues that Muslim societies do not represent a homogeneous sociality but rather a structure containing intense (ethnic, sectarian, dispositional, political, cultural) differences among themselves (pp. 9–10, pp. 24–25). He suggests that the term Muslim World is recent and that this changed with the 'new' meaning ascribed to the notion of the *Ummah* (pp. 12–13). Thus, according to him, the perception arose that homogeneity was desired among Muslims, or that a homogeneity had existed in the past; however, he states that such a homogeneity was absent historically, and therefore, the absence of homogeneity should be accepted as proof that the conceptualisation of unity was also non-existent. However, the judgment here is the manifestation of an anachronistic expectation. It is unrealistic to expect homogeneity from people living in pre-modern societies—that is, in traditional empires or dynastic states; rather, it is more reasonable to state that differences were central due to historical conditions and geographical and cultural structures. The matter of homogeneity among societies that emerged in the modern era—or the expectation thereof—has been made possible only up to a certain point, even with the nation-state's apparatuses for creating citizens, such as compulsory education, mandatory military service, and the state's monopoly over social and cultural epistemology. Given this, expecting social homogeneity or uniformity from people who lived in the early modern or pre-modern period means projecting the characteristic features of modern societies onto pre-modern societies, which makes it difficult to fully understand social formations that have not yet experienced modernity and have not reached the capacity to control societies with the apparatuses of the nation-state.

Furthermore, we must recall that the diversity Aydın mentions is tied to ethnic, historical, and geographical constraints. This diversity, conceptualised by the notion of '*Urf*' (customary law), implies different experiences at different times in the same geography, just as it allows for different interpretations in different geographies at the same historical moment. However, these differences pertaining to *Urf* are not valid in situations clearly stipulated by the explicit legal texts (*nass*) of the *Sharia*, which we can call the paradigmatic centre. In many critical matters, such as general public law, family law, inheritance law, and the law of war, commonality/similarity, not difference, is the case. The differences represented by the schools of jurisprudence (*madhhabs*) do not alter the relationships among Muslims or their responsibilities towards each other.

Aydın contends that Muslims lacked monolithic political unity in the pre-modern period, but that this ideal emerged after the 19th century with the conceptualisation of the 'Muslim World' (2017, p. 24). We stated above that Muslims are not homogeneous in the



context of social traditions and cultural practices. The assertion that Muslims lacked political unity before the 19th century is used alongside cultural heterogeneity, and the lack of political unity is cited as an argument supporting it. However, the expectation that all Muslims should live under a single political structure is the result of a conceptualisation that emerged in the modern era. As we discuss below, the Caliphate did not signify a 'Muslim United State'. Technical possibilities, geographical constraints, and the minimum conditions necessary for the practical application of law structurally preclude all Muslims worldwide from living under a monolithic state roof. However, this does not mean that the idea of the *Ummah* did not refer to the unity of Muslims worldwide, detached from one another (Aydın 2017, p. 2). The concepts and responsibilities of *Walā* and *Barā* (loyalty and disavowal) define mutual rights and obligations among Muslims, even if there is not a monolithic and homogeneous Muslim World (Toorawa 2013, pp. 178–179; Rustow 2013, pp. 318–319). These rights that Muslims have over one another form a notion of common interest and common enemy, advising that all Muslims be viewed as a single body and that organs in need of help be supported by the others. For this reason, in the case of acts of worship such as *Jihad* or mutual aid among Muslims, the vibrant parts of the *Ummah* are mobilised. That is, the rights of Muslims over one another command them to help each other in times of crisis, and this is fulfilled as a religious obligation. And the fulfilment of this obligation occurred at different times long before the modern era (such as during the wars against the Crusades). The fact that Buddhists, Confucians, or adherents of different pagan religions did not require such brotherhood and mutual responsibility should not lead to the conclusion that the desire of the Muslim World to mobilise using technical capabilities in the 19th century was derivative or 'invented later'. This relationally emergent practice persists in most acts of worship (with an emphasis on being a congregation). The difference lies only in its greater visibility in discourse and practice with the advancement of instrumental capacity and communication/transportation capabilities.

Therefore, arguing that the belief in the unity of all Muslims before the nationalistic ideology and European colonialism racialised and separated them is a misconception (Aydın 2017, p. 16) fails to provide a satisfactory answer to the following question: If Muslims were already practically separate where unity did not exist, why would racialisation or categorisation into races generate a need for the ideal of unity among them? By what argument did the ideal of unity acquire a religious dimension? We can take this question to a more world-historical dimension and ask: Considering the conditions of the pre-modern era, which cultural basins or civilisation (s) put forward the ideal of unity? If these ideals exist, in what ways do they differ from modern practices of unity, or do they share similarities with modern ideals of unity? All these questions necessitate considering the historical and cultural context. When considering the historical and cultural context, we can state that the ideal of unity (being one) already existed among Muslims, but that political, geographical, technical, and factual conditions did not permit the practical realisation of unity as we assume today. There has never been a country whose borders encompassed all Muslims, neither in the pre-modern nor the modern era. However, with the designation *Daru'l-Islam* (the abode of Islam), Muslims could live as individuals with the same legal rights in every region where the *Sharia* was in force. Since the distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim was



determined by the law of *dhimma* (protected non-Muslim subjects), non-Muslims paid the *jizya* (poll tax) and were deprived of some rights in the lands of *Daru'l-Islam*, while being Muslim represented having superior legal rights. The relations established with the status of Muslims living in other regions were determined by the actions of the actors in governing positions, while for ordinary Muslims, the attitude of the rulers towards other Muslims determined their legitimacy. If a ruler, despite having the power and authority, refused to help Muslims in other regions in need, it meant jeopardising their social legitimacy. Or, in other words, it meant jeopardising their political power over their subjects. This is because they would have created an opportunity for different actors aiming to share power to attack them with the accusation of 'not helping Muslims'. The argument of 'not helping Muslims' in the fatwas of deposition or in certain uprisings in the Ottoman Empire is supportive of this.

The notion of a monolithic West is considered necessary for the perception of a monolithic Muslim World. Indeed, according to Aydın, the perception of the Muslim World gained a different dimension in the context of the external threat of Western colonial activities, and therefore, this perception constructed a monolithic image of the West (2017, pp. 5–7). However, the point overlooked by this argument is that the definition of the Western World is not new. The Crusades in the pre-modern era, the religious motivation in the exploitation of the non-Western world during the early colonial period, the systematic genocide of Muslims and Jews in Andalusia, and similar actions created a Christian-based image of the West, and the West itself does not deny this. This approach, which transcended the Middle Ages and extended into the modern era, was also relevant when determining the fate of the 'Sick Man' Ottoman Empire during the time of the Concert of Europe, despite all its internal differences. The *Question Orientale* was the attempt to define this unity according to its internal balance. Therefore, to understand the military-political unity practices of the West before the 19th century—for example, the motivation (apart from some elites with economic aims) in the Crusades—we must accept the reality of a common Christian-Western identity and motivation. However, this is not the 'unity' that precedes the homogeneity understood today. Furthermore, it should also be stated that the people living in the lands targeted by this unity (Muslims or the Muslim World) constituted a different kind of unity in the eyes of the Crusaders.

The argument that the belief in unity and the concept of *Ummah* among Muslim societies emerged with modern technological developments like the train, telegraph, steamship, and printing press, and was practically absent before that, also contains a generalisation like the one above. Yes, of course, the speed and scale of social mobilisation increased greatly in the modern era; but when it comes to the Muslim World, factors such as relations among the *ulama* (scholars), long *Rihlas* (journeys for seeking knowledge) for education, the mobilisation of Sufi orders (*tariqas*) and dervishes, and the high-scale and rapid practice of trade have never interrupted relations among Muslims. Considering the geographical reach of the Halvetiyya, Tijaniyya, Naqshbandiyya, or Qadiriyya, we are taking the entire Muslim World into account. The diffusion of common knowledge and the shared conceptualisation of unity (which we mentioned above is implicit in mutual responsibilities) throughout the entire *Darulislam*, merely through the education received in politically and intellectually central cities such as Istanbul, Damascus, Cairo, or the *Haramayn*, and the subsequent spread of this knowledge via students, indicates that



unity is an epistemological rather than a technological outcome. The influence of effective scholars, ascetics, and other actors in the central cities, through their students and followers, carried the conceptualisation of the *Ummah*/Muslim World to Muslims far from the centre (Kaya 2011, pp. 29–30). For example, the influence and capacity for mobilisation produced by a scholar who lived in the second half of the 1600s, throughout various regions of the Muslim World before the 19th century, was made possible through the 'ulama network' (Voll 1975, p. 36; Voll 1987, p. 69).

The character of unity among Muslim societies in the pre-modern era was predominantly epistemological, not political. The practical results of this unity are also rooted in the *Rihla*—the scholarly journey undertaken by the *ulama*—and the ease with which they could socialise and integrate into the ruling elites when travelling to different regions. Ibn Khaldun, a scholar born in Andalusia who moved to North Africa, could become a *Qadi* (judge) in Cairo, occupy a similar position in Damascus, and even be invited to be patronised by Timur (Ibn Khaldun 2007). The epistemological unity is what made Ibn Khaldun feel at home in these vastly distant regions, but because this unity was also accepted by the political elites, the *Ummah* conceptualisation constructed by epistemological unity had to be accepted by the political elites—willingly or under duress.

In light of the above, it can be argued that the term Muslim World and the idea of Muslim solidarity it encouraged, along with practical outcomes such as collective struggle against colonialism, were present even before the 19th century. However, the colonial experience after the 19th century caused the idea of solidarity to become widespread and impose more urgent results. For this reason, the ideal of Muslim unity (*Ittihad-i Islam*) was debated, and attempts were made to formulate political positions among Ottoman scholars and intellectuals before the Muslims of Egypt or India who lived under colonial exploitation (Özcan 1997). The idea that the term Muslim World originated from Muslims living under the domination of England, Holland, France, and Russia (Aydin 2017, p. 7) is historically a weak claim. Defining the demand for equal treatment from the aforementioned colonialists as a path to salvation against their colonial arrogance—which viewed Muslims as racialised, second-class, and backward people—disregards the sensitivities of what we call epistemological unity; nevertheless, it is an undeniable truth that the racist approaches of colonial arrogance encouraged the idea of the salvation of the *Ummah*. The Muslim perception of unity, their feeling of responsibility towards other Muslims, and their feeling of shared destiny with Muslims living in other parts of the world—in times of crisis—existed long before the 19th century. However, the exploitation that occurred in the 19th century and the political-military-economic weakness of the current Caliphate gave rise to new discourses. So, what kind of political practice did the Caliphate perform before the late 19th century? Why did colonial powers, despite extensive field research, fear the institution of the Caliphate and its potential to mobilise all Muslims during the debates concerning the Caliphate at the end of the 19th century? These and similar questions necessitate that we re-evaluate the Caliphate and briefly address the practical reality it constructed in the Muslim World on the eve of the modern era.



The Caliphate on the Eve of the Modern Era: What It Was, What It Should Have Been

The new political structures that emerged in Europe with modernisation, or rather, the new forms taken by the powers in Europe, changed the previous regimes' understanding of the political (Ertman 1997, 90–154). The French Revolution, which brought about this change institutionally and violently, invented the term *ancien régime* to designate the previous regime(s). Subsequently, as European hegemony spread to the non-Western world, the theoretical assumptions, practical outcomes, and institutions of the Western political understanding also permeated the non-Western world. Undoubtedly, the political transformation experience of the Muslim World was not exempt from this. While the political was being redefined in the modern era, the institutionalism and institutional relations of the past also changed, causing profound epistemological ruptures. In this context, the issue of the Caliphate/Khilāfah and the political unity of Muslims in Islamic political thought took on a new character. At the very least, the manner of its discussion changed, evolving into debates that emphasised different dimensions of the Caliph's personal qualities, legitimacy, or minimal necessity. While earlier discussions centered on the qualifications of the Caliph, the manner(s) of accession to power, and the mode of politics, the modern era saw new topics of discussion—such as the poor conditions of all Muslims, the reasons for the Muslim World's decline, prescriptions for salvation, the status of a structure binding all Muslims, and effective methods for combating colonialism—come to the fore in connection with the Caliphate.

The emergence of new discussion topics regarding the Caliphate did not sideline the fundamental necessities of its legitimacy. However, new solutions were proposed in the context of urgent needs and the political manoeuvres required to meet them. In fact, Muslims had previously experienced a similar difference in dimension during the debates on the legitimacy of the Caliphate. The issue of the conditions and status of the legitimate Caliph, as discussed in the classics of Islamic political thought such as al-Mawardi (1994), al-Juwayni (2016), and al-Ghazali, began to be discussed with a different dimension by Muslims who were experiencing a socio-political crisis due to the Mongol aggression. Ibn Taymiyyah's work, especially *al-Siyasatu'sh-shar'iyya* (Public Policy in Islamic Jurisprudence), focused on the fundamental purpose for which the political was constructed, in order to find practical and Islamic solutions to the practical problems of Muslims in a time of crisis: the implementation of the *Sharia*, the establishment of justice, and the entrustment of the political authority (*amana*) to those qualified (1999).

Since the Caliphate resided with the Ottomans at the time of the encounter with modern Europe in the late 19th century, it was essential to evaluate the unity of the Muslim World within the context of the Ottoman Caliphate. The recognition of the Ottoman Sultans' Caliphate by non-Muslim states occurred with the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, signed after the 1768-1774 Ottoman-Russian War. This treaty marked the official registration and recognition of the Ottoman Caliphate by a non-Muslim state in international law. The Ottomans, who were forced to yield Crimea to the Russian sphere of influence (Shaw 2002, p. 65), had the clause emphasising that the Ottoman Sultan was the Caliph of all Muslims included in the treaty text in order to monitor the situation of Muslims in Crimea and to prevent the Crimean Khanate from causing a problem for the Caliphate center in



the future. This was because, according to the agreement, the Crimean Khanate was to remain politically free, albeit as a formality. However, it was not difficult to predict what this freedom would entail. For this reason, the words of the Ottoman delegate Yenişehirli Osman Efendi during the agreement are telling: "The Sultan is the Caliph of all Sunni Muslims. If he does not exercise this [his Caliphate] over India, Bukhara, and Fez, whose rulers are Sunni, this is a deficiency arising from the great distance between them. Recognising the freedom of the Tatars will mean a severe blow to the office of the Caliphate" (Buzpinar 2016, p. 50). The emphasis here is important; for it both reminds that the Caliph is the Caliph of all Muslims and stresses that there is only one Caliph. This emphasis continued to increase from the 17th century onward. As Buzpinar also states, the emphasis placed by the Ottoman political elites and *ulama* on the singularity of the Caliphate from the 18th century until the beginning of the 20th century—and even until the abolition of the Caliphate—indicates a state of vigilance against the danger of more than one person claiming the Caliphate (Buzpinar 2016, p. 60). In this context, the critique of the Ottoman Caliphate by the Sultanate of Fez in the 16th century—which argued that the Caliph should be from the Quraysh tribe—evolved by the 18th century, forced by practical consequences, into accepting the Ottoman Sultan as the Caliph of all Muslims and encouraging aid to him (Buzpinar 2016, p. 61).

As an example of the Ottoman Sultans acting as the Caliph of all Muslims, one can look at the text of the friendship and trade agreement made with Spain in 1782, which emerged after three years of negotiations. Spain requested that the agreement contain a promise from the Ottoman Empire not to aid Spain's enemies, in return for Spain's promise not to aid Ottoman enemies (Beydilli 2001, pp. 166–167). However, this request was not accepted because some of Spain's potential enemies might be Muslim, i.e., Muslim corsairs from the Barbary States might be at war with Spain and ask for Ottoman aid. Furthermore, the Sultans of Fez might also be at war with Spain. In this situation, because the Ottoman Empire was both the center of the Caliphate and because it is an obligation (*fard*) for other Muslims to help any Muslim asking for help (the relationship of *Walā* and *Barā*), the Ottoman aid to the Sultan of Fez or the corsairs of the Barbary States would be a religious necessity (Ahmed Cevdet Pasha 1309, p. 193). For this reason, this request was not included in the agreement. Moreover, the agreement text stressed that aid would be given to a Muslim state in case of war with Spain. It might be argued that this positioning was self-assumed by the Ottoman Empire to protect its own influence. However, conversely, the fact that Muslims living in regions very far from the centre saw the Ottoman Empire in a similar position because of the Caliphate shows that the issue was not one-sided. For example, the Sultanates of Malabar and Mysore in India sending envoys to the capital in the second half of the 1770s to ask for help from the Sultan-Caliph can be cited as an example (Aydın 2017, pp. 14–15). However, some requests for help, unfortunately, could not be met due to the weakening of the Ottoman Sultan's practical power. Yet, the inability to meet these requests due to practical inadequacies cannot lead to the conclusion that the Ottoman Caliphate was disregarded by Muslims or that the Ottomans only considered their own strategic interests and did not care much about other Muslims (Aydın 2017, p. 15). For it was not only the Ottomans and the Muslims in distant lands in need of help who deemed the Caliphate connection important; England also sought help from the Caliph to stop the Indian Muslims who were



obstructing their colonial activities in India, planning to use the office of the Caliphate to invite Muslims to obedience to the British (Özcan 1997, p. 17). However, when these demands were not met, they would start producing discourses questioning the legitimacy of the Ottoman Caliphate. The discourse emphasising that the Caliphate should be reserved for those from the Quraysh lineage in the Arab world was circulated in public discourse by the British.

Against the British discourses questioning the Ottoman Caliphate and asserting that the Caliphate should belong to the Arabs, the treatise written by Redhouse in 1877 is important because it summarises how the Caliphate was perceived and accepted in historical practice: "...gradually, but generally, has been acknowledged, accepted, and adopted by the whole Sunni Muslim world, from China to Algeria, from the frozen plains of Siberia to the tropical islands of Sumatra and Java, and the British colony of the Cape of Good Hope" (2002, p. 98). Redhouse's argumentation is a manifestation of factual reality. The Caliphate, after the four Rightly Guided Caliphs, partially evolved into a sultanate, weakened historically, and became completely symbolic during the Mongol invasions. This symbolisation had little effect beyond granting legitimacy to those holding practical power, while Ibn Taymiyyah shifted political legitimacy away from the existence or non-existence of a Caliph to whether Islamic *Sharia* was practically implemented and justice was established, as a solution. This is because the political crisis in the era he lived in was shaped by the absence of a strong Caliph, alongside the lack of any authority capable of managing most, if not all, Muslims in the Islamic world. In this situation, local sultanates and emirates emerged; Ibn Taymiyyah's action was to keep these emirates within the boundaries that protected the public interest (*maslahah*) of Muslims and to ensure they created a social reality where the Islamic faith could be practised. However, he did not discount the fact that actors whose power could exceed local boundaries would practically aspire to the Caliphate. Indeed, practical reality confirms this: actors (states) with the political and military power to protect the Muslim populace are favoured in the ordinary course of life and are naturally accepted as the Caliph. This is precisely how the Caliphate passed to the Ottomans. Yavuz Sultan Selim's conquest of Egypt and the subsequent bringing of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil—who was symbolically under the protection of the Mamluks—to Istanbul was not for the transfer of the Caliphate to the Ottomans. Furthermore, al-Mutawakkil did not leave the Caliphate to the Ottomans in a 'handover' ceremony (Buzpinar 2004, 113–127). The Ottomans, who did not protect al-Mutawakkil after he lost the Mamluks' protection, kept him in the capital for a period and then allowed him to go to Cairo, and after his death, the Caliphate claims of those descending from the Abbasid lineage were not taken seriously. However, the fact that Muslims cannot live without a Caliph, or rather, the warning *hadiths* that those who die without obeying the Imam of the time will die a *Jahiliyyah* (Ignorance) death, necessitate a Caliph. This practical need, along with the Ottoman Sultans defining themselves as Caliphs starting with Suleiman the Magnificent, and other Muslims seeing the Ottomans as their protectors due to their power and protection, practically meant the transfer of the Caliphate to the Ottomans. However, the Caliph, being the leader of all Muslims, should not be taken to mean that he possesses the capacity to provide a solution to every problem at all times. The limits of the Caliph's practical power also define the limits of the internal unity and strength of the Muslim World. If the Caliph has sufficient political



and military power, he is considered obligated to protect the rights of Muslims in any region; if he fails to fulfil this obligation, it is emphasised that he will be held accountable for neglecting his responsibilities both in this world and the hereafter. However, the Caliph's inability to assist a Muslim in situations where his political and military power is insufficient does not imply that the institution of the Caliphate is non-functional or merely symbolic.

The 20th Century: New World Order Debates¹ and Unity in the Muslim World

Understanding the global system that established the current political, economic, and cultural world is equivalent to grasping where and how the Muslim World is positioned within this system. The period between the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 and World War II was an era during which the war-weary world sought to reconstruct its fractured orders, and populations grappled with the economic and agricultural crises of 1929. Following Europe's second initiation of a major power war and the creation of unimaginable catastrophic crises on its own soil, the year 1945 marked the re-establishment of peace. At this juncture, unlike the First World War, an idea of a global order began to be voiced by the victors. It is known that the post-war 'World Order' discussions were tied to *Pax Americana*. However, where the issue crystallises in public academic debates indicates the presence of different approaches, modes of reading, and preferences. In this context, the political positions to which each evaluation is committed implicitly express their visions for the future while attempting to understand the present. So, in this regard, what is meant by the 'New World Order' designation in public academic debates? Moreover, can a genuine order, beyond what is actually meant, be spoken of in reality? If so, how should it be defined for us to know what kind of world awaits us in the future? In this context, we must first state that Socialist, Liberal, and Islamist public discourses have sometimes common and sometimes differing definitions of the New World Order due to their political preferences.

The New World Order for Socialists or Liberals

By Socialists or Liberals, I do not mean all socialist/liberal structures or individuals, but the ideal type of the socialist/liberal discourse that is dominant in public academic debates.

The alliance of the Western coalition led by the United States and the Soviets to defeat the Germans against Nazi expansionism necessitated the establishment of a balanced structure after 1945. Especially Europe's failure to re-establish the balance it had created within itself a century earlier (the Concert of Europe) after World War I, and the United

¹ For a more extensive discussion on the dimension of the new world order concerning Muslims, see Kurğan, Erdal. 2025. 'Kolonyalizmden Postkolonyalizme: Orta Doğu, Göç ve Küresel Düzenin Yeni Hali' [From Colonialism to Postcolonialism: The Middle East, Migration, and the New State of the Global Order], in *Küresel Göç ve Türkiye* [Global Migration and Turkey], eds. Ersoy, İmre S., Aysan, Mehmet Fatih & Kurğan, Erdal, İstanbul: Marmara Üniversitesi Yayınları. The conceptual discussion presented here follows the same trajectory as the conceptual discussion in that article



States' inability to collect the loan aid it had provided to the continent, paved the way for the process leading up to and after 1945. At the peace talks concluding World War I in 1918, France's stance and the price it sought to exact from Germany seemed to suggest a forthcoming rematch even at that time. J. M. Keynes, a member of the British delegation at the talks, emphasised that these were not peace talks but preparations for a new war. According to Keynes, the war reparations demanded by the French were an amount the Germans could not pay, and the peace terms were conditions they could not accept. Ultimately, Keynes's prediction proved correct, and World War II occurred.

After World War II, the US did not repeat the mistake it made in 1918: it did not leave the continent to its own devices; politically, militarily, and economically, it integrated the Western powers into the system it constructed. Symbolically, the 'Dollar-centric' International Monetary Agreement' was signed in 1944 based on the decision reached in Bretton Woods, a small town in New Hampshire, USA. Subsequently, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were established. This was not merely economic cooperation but also a global political organisation that did not include the Soviets (and countries close to them). And in the newly constructed post-war economic order, modern liberal economic policies, which allowed for state regulation—the theoretical framework of which was provided by Keynes—became prevalent. In this post-war economic order, states prevented unemployment by creating jobs through massive public investments while also stimulating the market by encouraging consumption. At the same time, states provided essential social needs such as education, healthcare, and pensions through welfare state practices. In fact, these economic policies were implemented by Nazi Germany before 1945, but let us be content with this for now.

The crisis of the Bretton Woods system established in the post-1945 era, along with economic downturns such as the 1973 oil crisis, led to the economic policies first implemented by the coup administration in Chile in 1973, and subsequently by Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US in the late 70s and early 80s, which are generally referred to as the Neo-liberal order. This era, in which welfare state policies were abandoned, labour organisations were restricted, and public services such as education and healthcare were marketised, also reflects the period when the discourse of 'Globalisation' began to emerge and spread. It is an era characterised by the rise of identity politics, consequently bringing multiple identity issues to the agenda, questioning the boundaries and conventional policies of the nation-state, and the proliferation of cultural pluralism (Fülberth, 2018: 265–291). In this period, where organised structures—regardless of whether they are socialist or right-wing/nationalist—are defined as tools of domination, sociality and social organisations are changing, and processes are centred on identity politics.

In this 'New World Order' (Harvey, 2010; Hardt & Negri, 2023), which Socialists evaluate from a critical perspective and Liberals from an affirmative one, the *homo economicus* is unrestrained by any legal bond. The preceding legal and public benefit-centric restrictions of the *homo juridicus* are abandoned in the neo-liberal era, and the *homo juridicus* is translated into the language of the *homo economicus*. In other words, the law is constructed to serve the interests of capital; the state creates the market.



To summarise, this order, which permitted the abandonment of the post-war order and the spread of globalisation and neo-liberal policies, is characterised by Socialists and Liberals as the New World Order.

The New World Order in Islamist Discourse

Unlike the Socialist or Liberal discourse, Islamist discourse differentiates itself by not seeking the New World Order in the language of political economy. In Islamist discourse, the New World Order begins in the early 90s when NATO positioned Islam in its new enemy concept (Albayrak, 2007: 45). Following the end of the Cold War, since the Soviets were dissolved, the destabilising power/actor needed for *Pax Americana's* legitimacy was now represented by Muslims.

The 'green belt' project, which centred on the Muslim world serving as a buffer against Soviet 'red' expansionism in the 1980s, began to be abandoned in the 90s. The Green Belt project actually did not operate with the efficiency expected by the US. The project, which presupposed an identity of 'Moderate Islam/Muslim' that was compatible with the liberal-capitalist values of modern Western civilisation, also included mass mobilisation to be leveraged against the socialist threat. However, the project failed to account for one thing: the procedural premises of Islam. That is, the epistemic sources of the monotheistic worldview not only rejected the liberal-capitalist values promoted by the US but also viewed them as falsehoods on the same scale as the socialist worldview. For this reason, for Islamists, the capitalist expansionism of the US was at least as dangerous as the communist expansionism of the Soviets. Consequently, mainstream Islamist structures remained distant from the green belt project, apart from narrow-framed, individual, or local involvements.

The collapse of the Soviets and the Green Belt project opened the door to a new world for Islamist discourse: the New World Order. The critical threshold of this order was NATO's declaration, in its 'New Strategic Concept', that it viewed Islamist fundamentalists as its existential enemy. In this context, the statement made by former NATO Secretary-General Willy Claes in February 1995 is very clear: '...in the five years since the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, Islamic militancy has emerged as perhaps the gravest threat to the alliance and Western security.'² The notion that Islamism was the new enemy concept after the Soviets was articulated much earlier than Claes, in 1990 and also in the context of NATO, by Margaret Thatcher, the architect of neoliberal policies. As the 2000s approached, the rising discourse of 'Islamist terror' became a dominant rhetoric in the conventional press, and military interventions in different geographies of the Islamic world did not meet with sufficient reaction because they could find a legitimate basis in world public opinion.

Following the 9/11 attacks, the strategic concept surpassed the Atlantic and Continental Europe and spread globally. Every government, strong or weak, from the US to France, from Russia to China, from Uzbekistan to Angola or Niger, was able to proceed with the liquidation of Muslim opposition by labelling it with the rhetoric of

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/02/09/nato-seeks-talks-with-n-african-mideast-states-on-islamic-militants/cf728b91-d57d-4126-9e40-b77c9aa38763/> retrieved: 25.10.2025



terror. Therefore, the definition of the New World Order in Islamist discourse can be read as the globalisation of anti-Islamism led by the West.

The Nature of the New Order

In fact, both the Socialist and Islamist definitions of the New World Order have justifiable aspects. However, my personal conviction is that the New Order has been in existence for a very long time and has created the entire international public sphere.

The point missed by the conventional understandings of the world order is its pro-Zionist structure—which supports Zionist interests under all circumstances—that remains unchanged, unlike the changing sides of the order, and gives the order its character. Bringing the philosophical and academic premises of this system to the fore is one of the indispensable prerequisites for understanding its nature. I claim that the influence of Zionism in the establishment of the UN, the declaration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and so forth, cannot be denied.

The post-1945 order, *Pax Americana*, where the institutions known internationally today were built, never saw the Soviets as an existential other, contrary to Cold War rhetoric. They were already allies in pushing back the Nazis. The US-Soviet conflict experienced in the first years of the order until its institutions were established began to soften with *détente*, not long after—10-15 years later—and the order was consolidated with a mutually agreed-upon, controlled tension. The price for the US was the acceptance of the Soviets as a superpower. For this reason, the New World Order was consolidated on a global scale by including Soviet Russia and China, with absolute veto power, in the United Nations (UN), the symbolic institution of the post-’45 order.

The pro-Zionist character of the order is not solely the exclusion of the Germans as an atonement for their Nazi sins; it was also the recognition of Jews as a separate nation by the Allies (US, UK, France, USSR, and China). Our point is not that a Jewish identity or Judaism does not exist; of course, there is a reality called Jews and Judaism. However, the recognition of this entity as a ‘nation’ in the age of nation-states also presupposes a state and a homeland for that nation; if the state and homeland do not exist, it makes them necessary and legitimate.

The pro-Zionist character of the New World Order both legitimised and accelerated the process leading up to 1948. The realisation of a homeland for the stateless Jewish population would only be possible by evacuating the non-Jewish population from the region we define as Palestine, with Al-Haram Al-Sharif (the Noble Sanctuary) at its centre. The ‘Transfer’ discussions in the early 1940s, which envisioned moving the surplus population in Europe as colonisers to sparsely populated areas, were also on the agenda of US President Roosevelt (Mazower 2013, p. 108). The secret M-Project, or ‘Migration Project,’ prepared during the war, did not only aim to give the Jews a homeland. It also aimed to coordinate international agreements between European countries with a population surplus—the countries that would export population—and the countries where the population was projected to be settled (Mazower 2013, pp. 105–106). However, Roosevelt’s project failed. Yet, the Jewish export part of the project continued in a complex manner. Demographers, geographers, and other academics, such



as Eugene Kulischer, Joseph Schechtman, and Vladimir Jabotinsky, each of whom was a Zionist or even an active Zionist, constructed the discourse in the post-'45 order that viewed the existence of Zionism as a state as the unique legitimacy of the order (Mazower 2013).

In addition to the pro-Zionist character of the New World Order, we must also remember that it is Eurocentric and colonialist. Among the things that remained unchanged on the path from colonialism to post-colonialism is the circulation of political, economic, military, and epistemic discourses—which recreate the domination of the system's hegemonic powers—in public debate spheres. This discursive struggle gave rise to its opponents; while the hegemonic discourse stood on one side, critical approaches emerged opposite it. Nevertheless, the Muslim World, in the post-Caliphate era, has been coded as the absolute other of the new order. The pro-Zionist nature of the order not only disregards the systematic genocide of the Israeli occupation regime but also tolerates movements of 'history-cide' that attack the historical past of Muslims. In this context, an arson attack was carried out against the Al-Aqsa Mosque in 1969 as one of the Zionist terror activities ongoing in the Palestinian territories since the 1890s. The unintended consequence of this action gained a new dimension with the construction of an institutional body by the Caliphate-less Muslim World, which they hoped would fulfil the Caliph's duties in practice.

OIC: Replacement of the Caliphate, Power Struggle, or Effort for Existence?

Al-Aqsa Mosque, one of the three holy sanctuaries of Muslims, was set on fire by a Jew on August 22, 1969. These 'civilian' attacks, seen as militia activities of the Zionist occupation regime and directed at the history of Jerusalem and the sacred sites of Muslims, were met with outrage across the entire Muslim World. The most significant and institutionally permanent of these reactions was the establishment of 'The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation' (OIC). With a decision taken at the Summit convened in Rabat on September 25, 1969 (12th Rajab 1389 Hijra), under the leadership of the then Saudi King Faisal and Moroccan King Hassan, it was decided to establish an international institution to which all Muslim countries would be members. Subsequently, at the first Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers (ICFM) held in Jeddah in 1970, agreement was reached on giving the organisation permanent status, making Jeddah the headquarters of the secretariat until Jerusalem was liberated, and appointing the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, as the founding Secretary-General.³ At the 3rd ICFM Session held in March 1972, the Charter of the Islamic Conference was adopted, giving the organisation legal personality.

According to the organisation's founding Charter, the organs of the OIC are listed under 11 separate headings. These 11 headings express both the names of the core organs and the types of organs. Accordingly, the institutional structure of the OIC consists

³ The current Secretary-General, serving as the 12th in the post, is Hissein Brahim Taha, and the Organization has 57 member states. This number grants the OIC the distinction of being the international organization with the largest number of member states after the UN.



of: 1. Islamic Summit, 2. Council of Foreign Ministers, 3. Standing Committees, 4. Executive Committee, 5. International Islamic Court of Justice, 6. Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission, 7. Committee of Permanent Representatives, 8. General Secretariat, 9. Subsidiary Organs, 10. Specialised Institutions, and 11. Affiliated Institutions. Among these organs, the Islamic Summit, the Council of Foreign Ministers, and the General Secretariat are the most effective (Ataman & Gökşen 2014, p. 12). The Islamic Summit, the main decision-making body, is composed of heads of government/state and kings. Meeting routinely every three years unless an extraordinary meeting is necessary, the Islamic Summit determines the basic policies to be followed by the organisation. Accepting the principle of discussing every issue related to the Muslim World, the organisation presents solutions to these issues and adopts resolutions regarding the organisation's common stance on these matters. A term president is elected at every ordinary meeting of the Islamic Summit held every three years; thus, the term presidencies are for three years. The arrangements required for the Islamic Summit meetings are carried out by the Council of Foreign Ministers and the General Secretariat.

The second-highest and effective decision-making body of the organisation is the Council of Foreign Ministers, which consists of the foreign ministers of the member states or their official representatives. Meeting once a year normally, the Council of Foreign Ministers can also hold extraordinary meetings upon the request of the General Secretariat or any member. It holds coordination meetings during the UN General Assembly to develop a common stance among member states; it determines the policies to be pursued and establishes common positions. The Council of Foreign Ministers, which meets in a different member state each year, ensures the implementation of decisions that determine the organisation's general policy and the review and monitoring of decisions taken at previous meetings of the Islamic Summit and the Council of Foreign Ministers. Key duties, such as the appointment of the Secretary-General and his assistants, the adoption of the organisation's budget, and the proposal of new organs or committees, are also under its purview.

The General Secretariat, the executive organ of the organisation, is responsible for ensuring dialogue among member states; controlling and reporting the implementation of the decisions and recommendations of the Islamic Summit and the Council of Foreign Ministers; and supporting the subsidiary or auxiliary organs and specialised institutions by guiding and coordinating their programs. The Secretary-General, the most effective executive of the organisation, can be elected by the Council of Foreign Ministers for a term of five years, for a maximum of two terms. The Secretary-General submits his assistants for the approval of the Council of Foreign Ministers and appoints the staff of the organisation. Employees of the General Secretariat do not receive orders or instructions from any government or authority outside the organisation while performing their duties. The subsidiary organs specified in the OIC Charter are: the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC); the Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture (IRCICA); the Islamic University of Technology (IUT); the Islamic Centre for Development of Trade (ICDT); the



International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA); and the Islamic Solidarity Fund and its Waqf (ISF).⁴

Within the OIC, there are four permanent committees, each operating under the patronage of the head of state of a different country. The relevant ministers of the member states attend the meetings of these committees. These committees are the Al-Quds Committee, the Standing Committee for Information and Cultural Affairs (COMIAC), the Standing Committee for Economic and Commercial Cooperation (COMCEC), and the Standing Committee for Scientific and Technological Cooperation (COMSTECH).

Among these committees, the one with the closest relationship to the organisation's founding motivation is the Al-Quds Committee. Established in Rabat in 1975, the main purpose of the Al-Quds Committee is to coordinate economic aid provided to Muslims in various cities of Palestine, especially Jerusalem. In addition, the committee determines the necessary measures to be taken for the protection of the sacred sites of Muslims in and around Jerusalem, particularly Al-Aqsa Mosque, and monitors the implementation of the required actions. The other committees were established with the intention of promoting the economic and social development of member countries and increasing their mutual relations in these areas. These committees are tasked with monitoring the implementation of OIC decisions concerning economic and commercial cooperation, enhancing the capacity of member states in these matters, and presenting recommendations. COMCEC has developed significant cooperation programs, working to foster collaboration among Muslim countries in almost all economic sectors, such as trade, industry, agriculture, food, transportation, communication, energy, finance, health, demography, and technical cooperation (Ataman 2006, p. 600).

In addition to the committees, there are also Specialised Institutions, each with its own independent budget, determined by independent legislative bodies. The specialised institutions established to date in this context are: the Islamic Development Bank (IDB); the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO); the Islamic Broadcasting Union (IBU); the International Islamic News Agency (IINA); the Islamic International Committee of the Red Crescent (ICIC); and the Centre for Science, Technology and Innovation (STIC).⁵ The OIC also has other organs and institutions outside of these different categories. Among these, the Executive Committee, the Committee of Permanent Representatives, the International Court of Justice, the Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission, and the Islamic Universities should not be forgotten.

The main objective of the organisation is to achieve solidarity and cooperation among member states, and its other important goals can be listed as follows: i- To increase cooperation among member states in economic, social, cultural, scientific, and other vital fields, ii- To prevent and end colonial activities applied in Muslim countries, iii- To combat hunger, eradicate poverty, and ensure access to basic nutrition in every country, iv- To

⁴Subsidiary

Organs,"

<https://new.oic-oci.org/SitePages/OrganisationsEn.aspx?Item=9&OrgType=Subsidiary%20Organs> retrieved 25.10.2025

⁵Specialized

Institutions"

<https://new.oic-oci.org/SitePages/OrganisationsEn.aspx?Item=11&OrgType=Specialized%20Institutions> retrieved 25.10.2025



establish peace by ending ethnic and religious conflicts existing in member states, and v- To ensure the protection of cities and structures considered sacred from a religious perspective (Kayaoğlu, 2015).

Considering all this and the successes or failures of the OIC in the Muslim World since its establishment, the resulting picture is as follows: the OIC is an Islamic Union attempted in the post-Caliphate era and the age of nation-states. It is even possible to suggest that the OIC is an endeavour for a contemporary Caliphate practice, considering the committees, auxiliary organs, etc., that we mentioned above. However, the purpose of establishing this union, the domestic political situations of the actors within the union, their positions in the international public sphere, the economic relationship networks of the member countries, and whether ordinary Muslims in the countries have a say in the administration—many such points determine both the capacity and the practical power of the union.

The Arab Cold War (Cleveland 2015, p. 360; Kerr 1971) that occurred during the OIC's establishment period—namely, some Arab countries being satellites of the capitalist Western world while others were pro-Soviet—significantly affected the founding process as a major handicap. Despite the heinous attack on the Al-Aqsa Mosque being the trigger for the establishment, the division among the Arab political elites made the liberation of Jerusalem a secondary issue. Furthermore, the Kemalist Islamophobia experienced in Turkey, the most influential power and the remnant of the Caliphate in the Muslim World, prevented the organisation from acquiring the experience necessary to draw a real institutional identity and roadmap. Turkey's decisive influence within the OIC and its ability to overcome its internal secularism syndrome only became possible in the early 2000s. Not only Turkey's but also the activities of other Muslim countries within the organisation could not (or cannot) perform at the same level, often turning into an arena for hegemonic struggle where some countries attempt to dominate. For instance, Saudi Arabia's desire to be decisive during the establishment phase was rooted in its rivalry with Egypt in the Arab world and its anxiety about losing leadership to Egypt. However, Egypt's distancing itself from the Soviets, its brief war with the Israeli occupation regime, and Iran's sectarian-motivated efforts to export the revolution after the Islamic Revolution compelled Saudi Arabia to approach Egypt again. Nevertheless, this approach did not significantly change the practical results.

Despite the OIC being established with the purpose of liberating Jerusalem, the political interests of the political elites of the member countries do not align with the OIC's agenda. The primary factor in this is undoubtedly the fact that we live in the age of nation-states. The concepts of *Ummah* and the Muslim World, as we discussed in the introduction, although they existed in the pre-modern era, the new circumstances created by the modern era provided technical possibilities that could make the *Ummah* and the Muslim World more dynamic and more monolithic. Paradoxically, however, a politically much weaker unity is practised in the Muslim World today than in the pre-modern era. This is primarily because national identities, national borders, and national interests are prioritised over the Muslim World. However, this prioritisation is not done by the Muslim populations but predominantly by the political elites. A regime-populace dichotomy exists in many states prevalent in the Muslim World. While the populations are mostly inclined to favour the Muslim World, the regimes—the political



elites—adopt a position in the opposite direction. In addition to national division, sectarian differences can also be read as an obstacle to the ideal of unity. However, even though sectarian differences were present in the pre-modern era, they did not lead to a violent separation that would create a crisis within the *Ummah*. Even today, there are actors who fuel separation; however, these actors remain marginal, and the majority within the *Ummah* does not prioritise sectarian differences in times of crisis.

The OIC's performance in practically fulfilling the function of the Caliphate is weakened by the existence of other institutional unions and rival organisations. For example, the Arab League, established before the OIC (excluding Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran), was founded in 1945 by largely the same effective states in the OIC, with a similar objective of liberating Jerusalem. The oil-exporting countries among the 22 members of the organisation also influence the organisation's decisions. Furthermore, the D-8 union, the unions formed among African countries, the unions formed among Asian countries, etc., all restrict the practical power of the OIC and reduce its capacity to act.

Although the economic committees of the OIC work more efficiently compared to its political committees, they fail to produce the expected practical results. Since most OIC member countries produce almost nothing except natural resources and agriculture, achieving an autarkic economy does not seem possible for now. Both the poor quality of human capital and their dependence on the outside world in many areas compel the countries to act in their own interests. Consequently, these countries are often forced to accept the impositions of other non-member countries (Dabour, 2001). In addition to the political problems within the OIC, economic problems also hinder cooperation. The development gap among OIC member states prevents economic integration. Although the number of OIC member countries is 57, a total of 77.7% of exports are carried out by only 10 countries. This situation differentiates the economic priorities of the countries and thus prevents a common course of action. At the same time, this situation causes not all countries within the OIC to have an equal say (Sey 2020, p. 70).

In the recent period, especially after 9/11, the OIC has made efforts to generate public discourse in combating Islamophobia. In this context, it reports on rising anti-Islam sentiment in the Western world and combats Islamophobia under the rhetoric of human rights. Culturally, it can be argued that its recent work on minority rights (Sharqieh 2012) attempts to fulfil a duty similar to the Caliph's role of protecting all Muslims. Just as they raise the rights of the Thai Muslim minority, the Filipino Muslim minority, and the Rohingya Muslims, they also generate public awareness by raising the rights of Muslim minorities in the West. On the other hand, cultural activities such as supporting the restoration of historical artefacts that are the common heritage of the Muslim World (Mosques, Madrasas, Libraries, Palaces, bazaars, bridges, etc.), the preservation of manuscript collections, and studies on the history of Islamic science are prominent.

We argued above that a Caliph naturally emerged and gained acceptance among Muslims with social consent when political-military power could practically protect Muslims. A similar situation could have occurred after the establishment of the OIC. The existence of a military and political power capable of taking practical political decisions and putting them into effect could have produced a Caliph from within the OIC. However, it is evident that the committees established by the OIC, despite concerning many political, economic,



and cultural issues, were not formed militarily. Yet, the stabilisation of the Muslim World and its capacity to produce a Caliph are primarily dependent on military power. The realisation of *Ittihad-i Islam* necessitates a coordinated military power, even if not monolithic and unitary. Unfortunately, the practical experience of the OIC has been far from this. As the occupation of Jerusalem deepened day by day, it failed to constitute a practical obstacle, could not prevent the occupation of Afghanistan (by the Soviets and the US), could not stop the occupation of Iraq during the First and Second Gulf Wars, turned into a phantom during the Arab Spring, and remained overly silent on the path to the Syrian revolution, projecting an image of a cumbersome institutional structure. For this reason, as the former Secretary-General of the OIC stated, the Organisation has unfortunately failed to realise its own potential (İhsanoğlu 2012).

The characteristic structure of the post-Caliphate era constructed a political atmosphere that shaped the 20th century and determined the actors within the OIC's internal body: 'Unity in discourse, rivalry in action.' This atmosphere has always been decisive in the Arab League and the practical United Arab Republic (Cleveland 2015, pp. 348–350). This environment, defined by unity in discourse and rivalry in action, persisted within the OIC until the early decades of the 2000s.

Conclusion

The Muslim World represents a widely dispersed society on a global scale, accompanied by local diversities. In the 19th century, the development of transportation and communication technology and the colonial aggression directed against the Muslim World compelled Muslims to engage in an organised struggle against the colonial West. This compulsory struggle foregrounded the issue of *Walā and Barā'* (loyalty and disavowal), shaping relations and mutual responsibilities among Muslims.

In contrast to modern approaches that advocate for all Muslims to live as a monolithic whole under a single state umbrella, the conception of unity among Muslims also existed in the Muslim World during the pre-modern era. However, this unity was not a homogeneous uniformity constructed among the citizens of modern states; rather, it was an epistemological solidarity that was implicit in the differences centred on *Urf* (customary law). Political unity under the Caliph's symbolic and practical leadership could be constrained by limitations such as military capacity, economic power, or vast geographical distance. Nevertheless, after the 19th century, the political, military, and economic weakness of the Caliph left the Muslim World vulnerable to colonial aggression, and following the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924, the Muslim World was left Caliphate-less in the New World Order. In other words, it practically lost its unity and became confined within the national borders of nation-states. The OIC, constructed under these historical circumstances, embarked with the ideal of fulfilling the duties performed by the Caliph during the post-Caliphate era and establishing the unity of Muslims. However, the distance between the regimes—the political elites—and the populace in the Muslim World, the struggle for hegemony within the OIC's internal structure, and the prioritisation of members' national interests over the Muslim World all invalidate the Organisation's intention to substitute the Caliphate.



Based on the experience practised by the OIC, we can assert that, despite the personal or national preferences of the political elites, the ideal of unity among Muslim populations still remains fresh. The emergence of quickly mobilised actors in the Muslim World during times of crisis is indicative of this. While nation-states prioritise their national and regional strategies, actors demonstrating a strong will—while being aware of this strategic *realpolitik* but also transcending it—can enact the practical outcomes of the Caliphate. This power and will are inherent in the socio-political structure of the Muslim populations, the Muslim World, or the *Ummah*.

References

- Ahmed Cevdet Paşa. (1309). *Tarih-i Cevdet*, vol. II, Dersaâdet.
- Albayrak, H. (2007). *Batı'nın Soykırımcı Tabiatı*. Vadi yay.
- Ataman, M. (2006). İKÖ: Müslüman Ülkelerin Birleşmiş Milletleri. in Ş. Çalış, B. Akgün, & Ö. Kutlu (Eds.), *Uluslararası Örgütler ve Türkiye* (pp. 589–616). Çizgi Kitabevi.
- Ataman, M., & Gökşen, A. (2004). *Sembolizm ve Aktivizm Arasında İslam İşbirliği Teşkilatı* (SETA Analiz, No. 74). SETA.
- Aydın, C. (2017). *The Idea of the Muslim World -A Global Intellectual History-*. Harvard University Press.
- Beydilli, K. (2001). İspanya/ İspanya-Osmanlı İlişkileri. in *DİA* (Vol. XXIII, pp. 166–170). İSAM.
- Buzpınar, T. (2004). Osmanlı Hilafeti Meselesi: Bir Literatür Değerlendirmesi. *Türkiye Araştırmaları Literatür Dergisi*, 2(1), 113–131.
- Buzpınar, T. (2016). *Hilafet ve Saltanat*. Alfa Yay.
- Cleveland, W. L. (2015). *Modern Ortadoğu Tarihi* (M. Harmancı, Trans.). Agora Kitaplığı.
- Dabour, N. M. (2001). Economic Problems of The Least -Developed and Land-locked OIC Countries. *Journal of Economic Cooperation*, 22(1), 105–144.
- el- Juwayni, İmâmü'l-Haremeyn. (2016). *el-Gıyasü'l-ümem fi İltiyasi'z-zulem* (A. Ünal, Trans.). Mevsimler Kitap.
- El-Gazzali. (n.d.). *el-İktisad fi'l-i'tikad*. Daru'l-kütübi'l-ilmiyye.
- El-Mawardi. (1994). *el-Ahkamu's-sultaniyye* (A. Şafak, Trans.). Bedir Yay.
- Ertman, T. (1997). *Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fülberth, G. (2018). *Kapitalizmin Kısa Tarihi* (S. Usta, Trans.). Yordam yay.
- Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2023). *İmparatorluk* (A. E. Pilgir, Trans.). Ayrıntı yay.
- Harvey, D. (2010). *Postmodernliğin Durumu* (S. Savran, Trans.). Metis yay.
- Ibrahim Sharqieh. (2012). Can the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Resolve Conflicts? *Peace and Conflicts Studies*, 19(2), 163–165.



- İbn Cema, B. (2010). *Tahrirü'l-ahkam fi Tedbiri Ehli'l-İslam* (Ö. Kavak, Trans.). Klasik Yay.
- İbn Khaldun. (2007). *Mukaddime* (Vol. I, S. Uludağ, Trans.). Dergah Yay.
- İbn Taymiyyah. (1999). *es-Siyasetü's-şer'iyye* (V. Akyüz, Trans.). Dergah Yay.
- İhsanoğlu, E. (2012). *The Islamic World in the New Century*. Hurst&Co.
- Kaya, E. S. (2011). Batılı Gözüyle Modernleşme Arifesinde Tecdîd. *İslâm Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 25, 27–50.
- Kayaoğlu, T. (2015). *The Organization of Islamic Cooperation: Politics, Problems and Potential*. Routledge.
- Kerr, M. H. (1971). *The Arab Cold War: Gamal Abd al-Nasr and His Rivals, 1958-1970*. London.
- Mazower, M. (2013). *Büyülü Saray Yok -İmparatorluğun Sonu ve Birleşmiş Milletler'in İdeolojik Kökenleri-* (Z. İ. Yelçe, Trans.). Alfa yay.
- Özcan, A. (1997). *Pan-İslamizm: Osmanlı Devleti, Hindistan Müslümanları ve İngiltere (1877-1924)*. İSAM.
- Redhouse, J. W. (2002[1877]). Osmanlı Sultanının Halife Unvanının Müdafaası. In İ. Kara (Ed.), *Hilafet Risaleleri* (Vol. II). Klasik.
- Rustow, M. (2013). Loyalty. In G. Böwering & P. Crone (Eds.), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought* (pp. 320–322). Princeton University Press.
- Sey, N. (2020). A Review on the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation: Economic Problems and Opportunities. *Journal of Islamic Economics and Finance*, 6(1), 55–74.
- Sharqieh, I. (2012). Can the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Resolve Conflicts? *Peace and Conflicts Studies*, 19(2), 163–165.
- Shaw, S., & Shaw, E. K. (2002). *History of the Ottoman Empire -Reform, Revolution and Republic-*. Cambridge University Press.
- Toorawa, S. M. (2013). Friendship. In G. Böwering & P. Crone (Eds.), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought* (pp. 200–202). Princeton University Press.
- Voll, J. O. (1975). Muhammad Hayya al-Sindi and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab: An Analysis of an Intellectual Group in Eighteenth-Century Madina. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 38(1), 32–45.
- Voll, J. O. (1987). Linking Groups in the Networks of Eighteenth-Century Revivalist Scholars: The Mizjaji Family of Yemen. In N. Levtzion & J. O. Voll (Eds.), *Eighteenth Century Renewal and Reform in Islam* (pp. 132–159). Syracuse University.
- Wallerstein, I. (1974). *The Modern World-System*, vol. I. Academic Press