



When Strategy Meets Uncertainty

Power in Transition, Policy under Pressure

**INTERVIEW WITH
VIOLA VON CRAMON-TAUBADEL**

German Politician with Bündnis 90 / Die Grünen

When Supply Lines Become Fault Lines

Can Japan and South Korea keep the lights on amid Indo-Pacific tensions? As rising geopolitical frictions threaten critical maritime routes, Johannes Hollunder analyses how the energy import dependencies of Japan and South Korea expose them to external shocks. Drawing on lessons from Europe's 2022 energy crisis, he examines both countries' vulnerabilities, evaluates their mitigation strategies, and considers whether renewable expansion could secure their long-term energy resilience.

Missing the Jungle for the Trees

How did US intelligence miss the warning signs of the Tet Offensive? Dmytro Sochnyev revisits one of the Vietnam War's most consequential intelligence failures. Despite abundant evidence of an imminent large-scale attack, entrenched assumptions and cognitive bias blinded American commanders to the signs. Sochnyev analyses how this misjudgement turned a tactical success into a strategic and political defeat, reshaping U.S. military thinking for decades to come.

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Is Taiwan really the next Ukraine? Amid rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific, Lenaïg Deslandes challenges the increasingly common comparison between China's ambitions toward Taiwan and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. She argues that despite superficial similarities, the two powers' expansionist strategies diverge sharply—Russia favouring military revisionism, China pursuing gradual, grey-zone statecraft. By unpacking these differences, Deslandes cautions against simplistic parallels that obscure the distinct geopolitical realities shaping Taiwan's future.

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EPIS BASICS: Hedging Against Uncertainty

How do small states navigate a world dominated by rival great powers? In EPIS Basics, Pablo Mathis unpacks the concept of hedging—a strategic middle ground between alignment and autonomy. Drawing on Kuik’s (2021) framework and examples from Singapore, the article explains how Southeast Asian states balance relations with both the US and China through middle, opposite, and fallback strategies to manage uncertainty in an increasingly tense geopolitical landscape.

Editorial Team



Editor

Alvin Karl Bürck is a German-Estonian graduate student of International Political Economy at the London School of Economics (LSE). His research focuses on the political economy of climate change, firm behaviour, and quantitative social science. In addition to editing the EPIS Magazine, he served on the Editorial Board of the Millennium Journal of International Studies, and acted as postgraduate student representative in at LSE's Department of International Relations. He previously gained professional experience in public sector consulting and public affairs in Berlin.



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Editorial



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When strategy meets uncertainty

For decades, globalisation was seen as the backbone of prosperity and stability. But as the last few years have shown, the same lines that connect us can also become fault lines. Supply chains turn strategic. City partnerships turn political. Information flows turn weaponised. What once promised resilience now breeds vulnerability. Our eight issue of EPIS Magazine explores what happens when connectivity and interdependence meet an age of strategic contestation.

Johannes Hollunder opens with an examination of how Japan and South Korea, two of the world's most energy-dependent economies, navigate growing insecurity in their maritime lifelines. Their story is one of exposure, and the search for autonomy, mirroring broader Indo-Pacific realities. Dmytro Sochnyev then revisits the Vietnam War Tet Offensive, uncovering how cognitive bias and institutional complacency can blind even the most powerful states. His piece reminds us that intelligence failures often stem not from ignorance, but from the inability to adapt to changing realities. Vincent Sipeer's contribution brings this closer to home, showing how the geopolitics of de-risking now extends to U.S. cities. His analysis of "subnational diplomacy" reveals that great-power competition no longer unfolds only between states, but also between municipalities, networks, and norms. Lenaïg Deslandes challenges simplistic analogies by dissecting the frequent comparison between Taiwan and Ukraine. Her argument, that not all threats follow the same logic, warns against narratives that substitute clarity with convenience. Jonatan von Moltke's essay on foresight analysis takes the discussion further: how can policymakers act in uncertainty without succumbing to false confidence? His piece questions whether foresight analysis truly provides direction or merely the illusion of control. Finally, Marie Klostermeier contrasts China's Vision 2049 with India's Vision 2047, framing them as two competing models of legitimacy in a multipolar world. Both aspire to shape the future; both are constrained by history.


This issue also features a distinguished set of guest contributions that extend our scope beyond the research of our fellows. Viola von Cramon-Taubadel, former Member of the European Parliament and long-time advocate for Eastern Europe, reflects on the future of EU enlargement and Europe's moral and strategic response to Russia's war on Ukraine. Dr. Hans-Christoph Atzpodien, Managing Director of the Federation of German Security and Defence Industries (BDSV), outlines the industrial and political foundations of a credible European defence readiness. Dr. Matthias Hackler, policy advisor to MEP Engin Eroglu, examines how Chinese scholars interpret Europe's trajectory in an era of shifting global narratives. Finally, Pablo Mathis concludes with an analytical primer on hedging strategies for EPIS Basics, explaining how small states balance autonomy and alignment in an uncertain world.

From supply lines to city halls, from intelligence failures to long-term visions, this issue traces how interdependence has become the defining tension of our century: the constant balancing between openness and protection, cooperation and control, foresight and humility. When strategy meets uncertainty, foresight must replace comfort, humility must temper confidence, and the art of statecraft becomes the management of fragility itself.

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Johannes Hollunder

When Supply Lines Become Fault Lines

The Implications of Energy Import Dependency for Japan and South Korea

About the Article

Can Japan and South Korea keep the lights on amid Indo-Pacific tensions? As rising geopolitical frictions threaten critical maritime routes, Johannes Hollunder analyses how the energy import dependencies of Japan and South Korea expose them to external shocks. Drawing on lessons from Europe's 2022 energy crisis, he examines both countries' vulnerabilities, evaluates their mitigation strategies, and considers whether renewable expansion could secure their long-term energy resilience.

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1. Introduction

February 2022 brought energy security back to the centre of geopolitical discourse. Over years, Europe had increasingly commodified energy and sought to separate its trade from politics. Amidst a shortage of indigenous resources, Europe turned to Russia to satisfy its energy demand, and Moscow supplied coal, oil, and natural gas that together accounted for roughly one quarter of Europe's total consumption in 2021 (Eurostat, 2022). This reliance was particularly pronounced in the natural gas sector, where Russia accounted for nearly half of all imports prior to 2022 (Yanatma, 2023). Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, however, shattered the illusion of a depoliticised external energy trade and reignited debates on energy security across Europe and beyond. The shock to Europe's energy system should prompt concerns in South Korea and Japan. Similar to Europe, both countries cannot meet their substantial domestic energy demand through indigenous resources and must therefore rely heavily on imports of primary energy supplies. This dependency exposes them to external risks, particularly the rising tensions in the South China Sea, through which a substantial portion of their energy imports passes. These circumstances raise the question of whether their energy supply chains are resilient enough to withstand potential conflict in the region, or whether they risk facing a situation akin to Europe's experience in 2022 should a conflict break out. This article examines the energy security environment of both countries, with a focus on electricity generation, given the projected decline in oil demand and the ongoing electrification of their economies.

2. Energy as a Source of Leverage and Vulnerability

Energy is a complex good. It is an essential input for all state activity, as vital tasks such as defence, public services, and economic activity cannot be sustained without it (Gökçe et al., 2021). Yet, due to the uneven distribution of energy resources across the globe, some states must rely on trade to meet their energy needs. This can raise

dependencies and may render import-dependent countries prone to outside pressure (Shaffer, 2011; Smith Stegen, 2011; Stoelzel Chadwick & Long, 2023). Several cases demonstrate how resource-abundant nations utilise energy supplies as instruments for political coercion, e.g. the 1973 oil crisis, when Arab OPEC members embargoed nations supporting Israel, and various occasions on which Russia has curtailed gas deliveries to Eastern Europe (Carney, 2014; Macalister, 2014; Pifer, 2021; Yergin, 2020). However, vulnerabilities can also result from third-party conflict along the supply line. For instance, naval traffic in the Red Sea, the primary corridor between Europe and Asia, was 70% lower in the first half of 2025 compared to the same period in 2023 (Suez Canal Authority, n.d.), following repeated Houthi attacks on vessels in the Bab al-Mandab Strait (Aguiar, 2025). States dependent on energy imports must therefore develop strategies to mitigate such external risks.

3. The Energy Strategies of Japan and South Korea

Although Japan and South Korea rank among the world's largest consumers of energy, they lack domestic primary energy resources that could sustain their electricity generation. As a result, they must import large quantities of coal, gas, and uranium. In 2024, Japan's electricity production was predominantly fuelled by coal and natural gas, which each accounted for approximately one-third of the overall output (Ember, n.d.-a). Fossil fuels are projected to retain a substantial share for at least the next decade, with Tokyo anticipating that thermal sources will sustain 42% of the total electricity generation by 2030, and up to 40% by 2040 (Agency for Natural Resources and Energy, 2025). Overall electricity output is expected to grow moderately during this period. Although the underlying plan does not specify the proportions of coal and natural gas by 2040, the latter will likely assume a larger share, as electricity market reforms will render coal-fired plants economically unattractive, and alternative

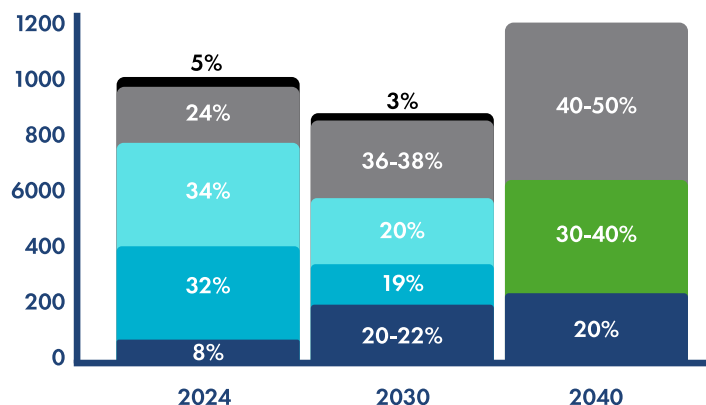
sources such as ammonia will likely not be available in sufficient quantities (Agency for Natural Resources and Energy, 2025). Japan's commitment to advancing carbon capture storage further underlines its intention to retain thermal generation as part of the long-term energy strategy. At the same time, Tokyo plans a return to nuclear generation, with the target of at least 20% of all electricity to be generated through new and reactivated nuclear reactors by 2030. It is uncertain, however, whether the share of nuclear power can be expanded sufficiently from the current 8% within the next five years (James, 2025). The shortfall in generation capacity could instead be ac-

commodated by increased coal or natural gas-based production, which can be scaled up flexibly in the short run. From an energy security perspective, this configuration means that Japan will remain dependent on energy imports in the medium- to long-term future. Government projections estimate an energy self-sufficiency rate of only 30% by 2030, and no more than 40% by 2040. Japanese authorities acknowledge this and emphasise long-term contracts and diplomatic initiatives as key measures for securing a reliable energy supply (Agency for Natural Resources and Energy, 2025).

Current & Projected Electricity Mix by Energy Source in TWh & %



Japan



South Korea

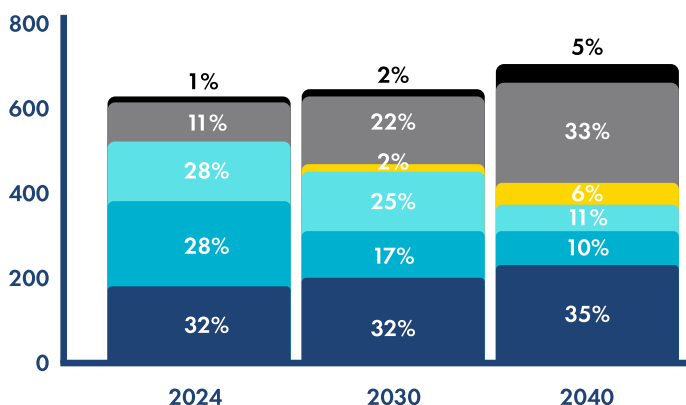


Figure 1: Current and Projected Electricity Mixes of Japan and South Korea, based on current plans. Data sourced from Ember, the Institute for Sustainable Energy Policies, Japan's Agency of Natural Resources and Energy, the Korea Energy Agency, and the Korea Power Exchange. For its 2040 projection, Japan does not provide a breakdown of individual fuel sources.

South Korea's electricity production likewise relies to a large degree on imported fuels. In contrast to Japan, it maintains a substantial nuclear base, but similarly generates almost two-thirds of its electricity from coal and natural gas (Ember, n.d.-b). Looking ahead, thermal power will remain significant, though on a downward trajectory. Gas-fired output is projected to stagnate until 2030 in absolute terms before falling to about half its current level by 2038, while coal is projected to decline soon, dropping to 17% by 2030 and 10% by 2038 (Korea Energy Agency, 2025; Korea Power Exchange, 2025). In addition, Korea's strategy foresees a gradual substitution of

coal with ammonia from the next decade onward (Korea Power Exchange, 2025). Renewables are projected to expand to 29.2% of electricity generation by 2038, yet fossil fuels and nuclear will continue to dominate, jointly accounting for 74.1% in 2030 and 55.9% in 2038 (Korea Power Exchange, 2025). Further, the growing utilisation of ammonia will require large-scale imports, which will effectively only alter the composition of current import dependencies rather than reducing them. As a result, even with a growing share of carbon-neutral electricity, the bulk of Korea's primary energy resource inputs will continue to depend on imports.

4. South China Sea Tensions as a Threat

The Status Quo

Japan and South Korea's heavy reliance on primary energy imports renders them vulnerable to external disruptions outside their control. The greatest source of risk lies in the escalating tensions in the South China Sea, which pose a threat to the maritime routes that transport their energy supplies. These risks primarily derive from intensifying competition between China and the United States as well as its regional allies. In recent years, China has intensified its air and naval activity around Taiwan, while its expansive claims in the South China Sea increasingly lead to confrontations with its neighbours (Davidson et al., 2025; Heydarian, 2025; Tang, 2025). At the same time, Beijing has steadily increased its defence expenditure, emphasised combat readiness and technological self-reliance, and expanded its range of military capabilities (Childs, 2018; Fan, 2022; SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, 2024; Wegener, 2025a, 2025b; Xi, 2019). In parallel, the United States has reinforced its military presence in the Indo-Pacific and pressed its allies for stronger security commitments (Kanodia, 2025; Maslow, 2024; Schulenburg, 2025). The friction in the South China Sea mainly revolves around three issues. First, the status of Taiwan represents the most acute flashpoint. Any military attempt to seize the island would necessarily involve extensive maritime and aerial operations and would likely be accompanied by efforts to blockade the island and prevent

foreign support. Such a scenario would involve extensive military activity in the surrounding waters, making them unsafe for commercial shipping. This would necessitate diversions to longer alternative routes or could even force some operations to be suspended. Second, unresolved territorial disputes in the South China Sea carry potential for further escalation. Stakeholder states have established military facilities on numerous contested features along the Scarborough Shoal, the Paracel Islands, and the Spratly Islands, and clashes over them would impact key sea lanes, even if Tokyo and Seoul are not directly involved (Zwartz, 2025). Third, even in the absence of open conflict, China's use of „grey-zone“ tactics already creates risks for energy shipments. Recent confrontations, particularly with the Philippines, illustrate how such tactics can escalate into physical clashes (Heydarian, 2025).

Impact on Japan and Korea

These developments have deepened strategic competition in the region and elevate geopolitical risks for commercial shipping. This directly affects Japan and South Korea, as a considerable share of primary energy shipments must cross the South China Sea en route to their shores. Figure 2 illustrates the primary shipping routes of these resources from their main suppliers.

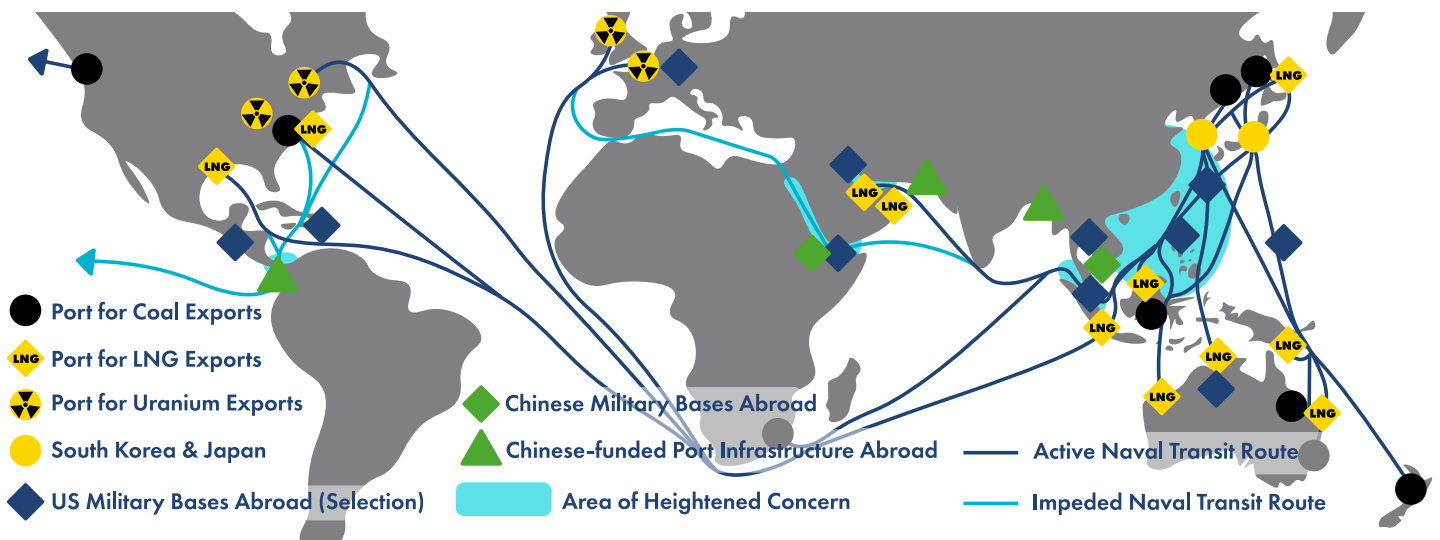


Figure 2: Shipping Lanes for Primary Energy Resources from Selected Key Suppliers to South Korea and Japan Based on Data from SynMax, Shipmap.org and Searoutes.com; Own Graphic

The commitment of both nations to gas-based electricity production renders deliveries of liquefied natural gas (LNG) a focal point. Seoul and Tokyo source their LNG imports primarily from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Africa, and increasingly from the United States (World Bank, n.d.-b, n.d.-d). Japan, for instance, maintains long-term delivery contracts with the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, and Malaysia, among others, and saw about 47% of its LNG imports transiting the South China Sea in 2024. South Korea is even more vulnerable, with approximately 68% of its LNG deliveries in the same year crossing the contested waters. Adding to this are the drought conditions in the Panama Canal, which have, since 2024, effectively rerouted almost all Asia-bound LNG shipments from American ports via Africa's Southern tip. This adds up to 20 days in additional travel time, and ultimately channels these cargoes through the South China Sea. Despite the partial restoration of transit capacity at the Panama Ca-

nal, LNG tanker passages have not yet fully recovered (Labrut, 2025; Miller, 2025). Further, the risk of drought remains, and sustainable alleviation can only be realised through a dam project, whose construction is expected to commence in 2027 (Garcia, 2025). In light of the growing LNG trade with the United States under their recent tariff agreements, Japan and South Korea must factor this elevated risk into their energy security planning. Papua New Guinea and Australia, the latter being both states' largest supplier, further provide a significant share of natural gas. Depending on the port of origin, shipments either transit the South China Sea or bypass it by travelling on routes west of the Philippines. However, impediments cannot be ruled out entirely if combat were to extend to Guam, where the United States operates a major naval base. In combination, over 90% of LNG supplies to both countries could be affected by a conflict.

Coal and Natural Gas Supplier to Japan & South Korea Import Volume in %

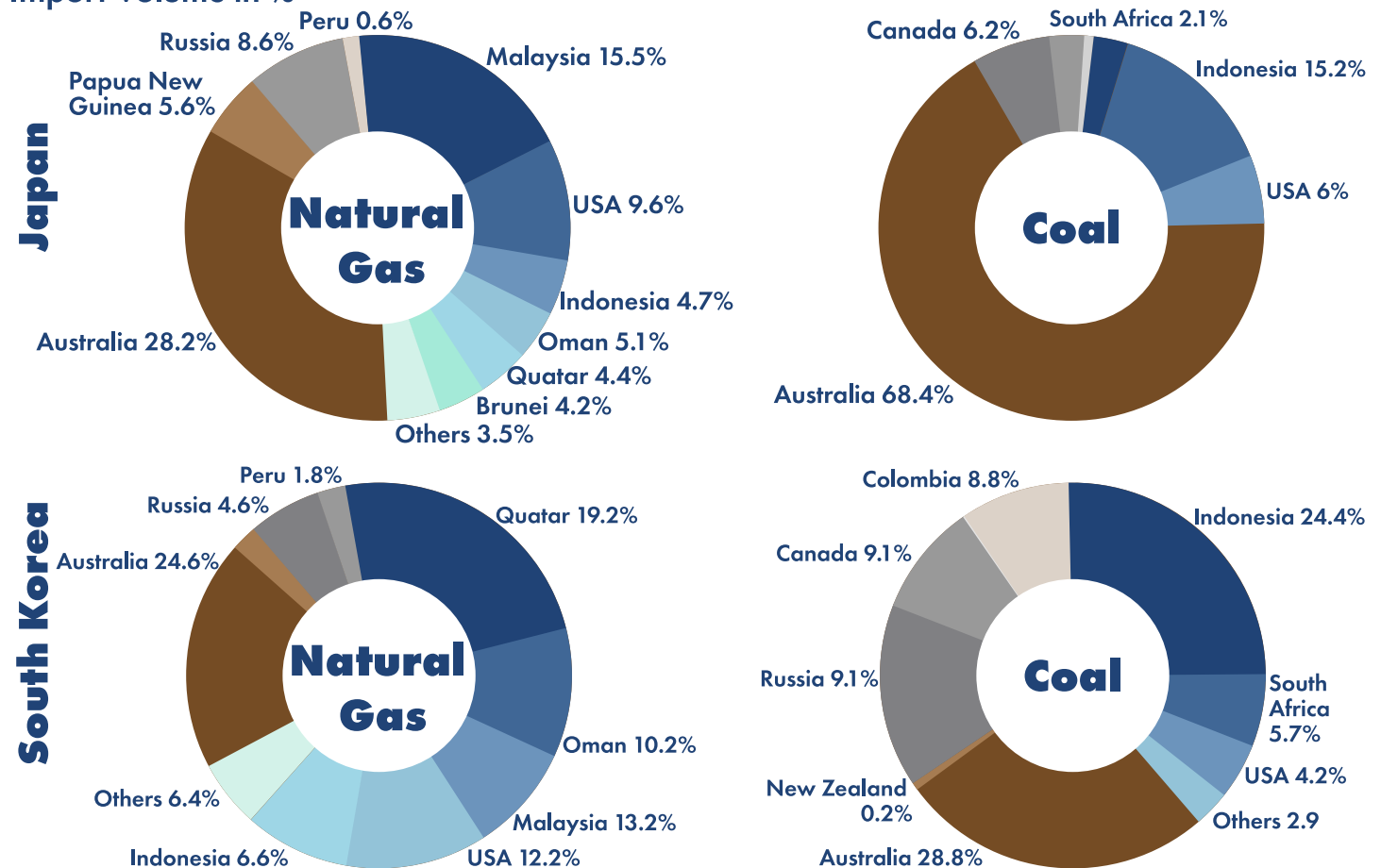


Figure 3: Distribution of Coal and Natural Gas Import Volumes to Japan and South Korea in 2024. Data sourced from the World Bank's World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS). Suppliers whose shipments typically travel on South China Sea Routes are coloured in blue; suppliers whose cargoes may cross or bypass the South China Sea on routes west of the Philippines, depending on port of origin, are coloured in brown; and suppliers whose deliveries typically avoid the South China Sea are highlighted in grey.

Coal imports face a lower risk of disruption. Japan sources the lion's share of its coal from Australia, while less than a quarter of its supplies transits the South China Sea (World Bank, n.d.-a). Most Australian cargoes depart from Queensland and New South Wales and typically take a route west of the Philippines, thus avoiding direct exposure to the disputed waters. Conversely, South Korea is exposed to a comparatively higher level of risk, primarily due to its greater reliance on Indonesian coal (World Bank, n.d.-c). Although Seoul maintains a larger share of low-risk suppliers, the steady decline in Russian imports and rising shipments from Indonesia have gradually shifted its coal trade towards more vulnerable routes. This dynamic will have to be observed more closely in the future. South Korea's commitment to nuclear power adds another layer of vulnerability, as it depends on enriched uranium imports for its fuel production. Most imports currently come from Europe and Russia, though Seoul has recently signed a long-term contract with a U.S.-based enrichment firm to offset Moscow's share (Ko, 2025; Park, 2025). While it is unclear from where these shipments will depart, East Coast ports are located closest to its Ohio facility. Therefore, unless the Panama Canal can consistently accommodate these cargoes, they will likely be directed via the Cape of Good Hope and the South China Sea, similar to the European shipments. Japan, by contrast, operates a closed nuclear fuel cycle, which enables it to reprocess spent fuel and thus reduces the need for constant imports. Furthermore, both countries are expected to incorporate ammonia into their energy mixes from the 2030s onwards, but this will likewise require large-scale imports, with likely suppliers including China, Australia, Indonesia, and Middle Eastern states (Agency for Natural Resources and Energy, 2025; Korea Power Exchange, 2025; Lim et al., 2023; Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy, 2022). Except for supplies from Australia, a considerable amount of these cargoes would likely transit the South China Sea, thus leaving ammonia imports subject to the same geopolitical risks as other energy forms. Of all imported fuels, natural gas poses the

Energy Security
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greatest vulnerability for Japan and South Korea in the context of South China Sea tensions. Gas will continue to fuel a significant share of electricity generation in both countries in the short and medium term, and involves the highest proportion of shipments transiting the contested waters. Furthermore, the proximity of Indonesia and Malaysia as major suppliers to potential conflict zones further heightens exposure, given that conflict could also directly affect export volumes. In comparison, coal supply chains are somewhat more robust, given the heavier reliance on Australia and other suppliers that can avoid the South China Sea. Finally, uranium deliveries are less immediately vulnerable, as nuclear fuel cycles of 18 months between refuelling offer a certain degree of protection against short-term disruptions (J. Lee & Lee, 2023). Nonetheless, the risks associated with South China Sea tensions extend beyond natural gas. Ultimately, all discussed fuel sources require a steady flow of imports and therefore leave little flexibility in the event of disruptions. Any such impediment could extend shipping times, inflate transport costs, raise insurance premiums, and cause greater price volatility, which would affect particularly short-term market prices. The resulting constraints on energy availability would need to be offset by limited storage capacities, or would otherwise compromise both countries' capacity to sustain economic output, public services, and military readiness. Meanwhile, the risk of political exploitation of energy supplies remains relatively low. Some key suppliers, such as Qatar or South Africa, have limited political stakes in Korea or Japan and therefore little incentive to weaponise exports. Others, including Australia and Canada, are like-minded partners or maintain close ties through trade, investment, and defence cooperation. Ammonia may present an exception, as global production is currently dominated by China (Mineral Commodity Summaries 2025, 2025). Heavy reliance on Chinese supplies could, over time, create opportunities for coercion. Overall, however, the immediate threat of deliberate supply manipulation remains limited compared to the vulnerabilities posed by maritime chokepoints.

5. Pathways Toward Risk Mitigation

Europe's experience demonstrates that energy-dependent countries cannot afford to wait for disruptions to materialise before strengthening their energy security. For Japan and South Korea, two options stand out by which they could strengthen the resilience of their energy systems. In the short- to medium-term, both countries could address risks by „secure-shoring“ supplies, i.e. shifting imports away from high-risk transit routes in the South China Sea towards less conflict-exposed and more secure corridors. The Alaska LNG Project offers a concrete opportunity in this regard. The project proposes the construction of a 1,300 km pipeline to transport natural gas from Alaska's northern reserves to an export terminal in the south, from where it could be exported to Asia. Shipments to Japan and South Korea would take approximately 10 days, which is less than half the time required for transport from the Gulf of America, and would avoid the contested South

This reliance is becoming increasingly precarious in the face of rising tensions in the region.



China Sea. Participation in the project would also support both countries in meeting energy import commitments made under recent tariff negotiations with the United States. Yet, the project requires vast capital investment, and doubts loom over its commercial viability, given the growing competition in the global LNG market (M. Kim & Hauber, 2025). Furthermore, as it would not come online before the early 2030s, its utility in reducing immediate vulnerabilities would be limited. The most effective strategy for mitigating import risks lies in reducing dependencies on external suppliers altogether. This can be achieved best through an accelerated transition to renewable energy. Unlike thermal generation, which requires a continuous inflow of imported fuels, renewables draw on naturally available resources and thus eliminate the need for ongoing imports. At most, key technologies may need to be sourced externally once, after which they can then produce electricity for decades. Hence, even if the technologies are imported, the risk exposure is far lower than with fossil fuels (Carfora et al., 2022; J. Kim, 2024).

Japan and South Korea have yet to realise their full renewable energy potential. Grid limitations, ineffective incentive structures, and strong domestic fossil sectors have thus far constrained renewable deployment and inflated costs (Daiss, 2025; M. Kim, 2025; Miyamoto, 2025a). However, planned grid upgrades and regulatory reforms are expected to bring solar and onshore wind to cost parity with thermal generation by the end of the decade in Korea, and are already the cheaper choice in Japan (M. Kim, 2025; M. H. Lee, 2025; Miyamoto, 2025b; Zissler, 2025). Moreover, both Japan and South Korea have substantial offshore wind potential and, as technological leaders, have the capacity to develop advanced energy storage systems to address the intermittency of renewables (Seitz et al., 2023). Exploiting this potential would

enable them to take steps towards greater energy autonomy and, in turn, reduce their vulnerability to disruptions arising from re-

gional tensions. However, an expansion of renewables would require time and further development, and can therefore not remedy energy security considerations in the short term.

6. Conclusion

Japan and South Korea's energy systems, and thus the foundations of their industrial capacity, public services, and national defence, remain overwhelmingly dependent on foreign imports. Neither country possesses significant reserves of coal, natural gas, or uranium, yet both generate the majority of their electricity from these resources. As these inputs are sourced by sea, their energy security is effectively tied to open and stable maritime routes across the Indo-Pacific. This reliance is becoming increasingly precarious in the face of rising tensions in the region. Europe's experience from the early stages of the Russo-Ukrainian war illustrates the costs import-dependent energy states face in the event of a supply disruption. To avoid a similar scenario, Tokyo and Seoul must devise

strategies to mitigate risk related to maritime routes in the South China Sea. Diversifying supply routes towards less exposed corridors poses one option, but existing long-term contracts and doubts over the commercial viability of projects such as Alaska LNG limit the scope of this approach. An expansion of renewable energy represents

a more sustainable path, but can only be realised as a long-term strategy. While complete isolation from global markets is unrealistic, greater energy autonomy through expanded deployment of renewables appears as the most viable route to enhanced energy security.

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Dmytro Sochnyev

Missing the Jungle for the Trees

How US Intelligence
Underestimated the Tet Offensive
and Lost the Vietnam War

About the Article

How did US intelligence miss the warning signs of the Tet Offensive? Dmytro Sochnyev revisits one of the Vietnam War's most consequential intelligence failures. Despite abundant evidence of an imminent large-scale attack, entrenched assumptions and cognitive bias blinded American commanders to the signs. Sochnyev analyses how this misjudgement turned a tactical success into a strategic and political defeat, reshaping U.S. military thinking for decades to come.

About the Author

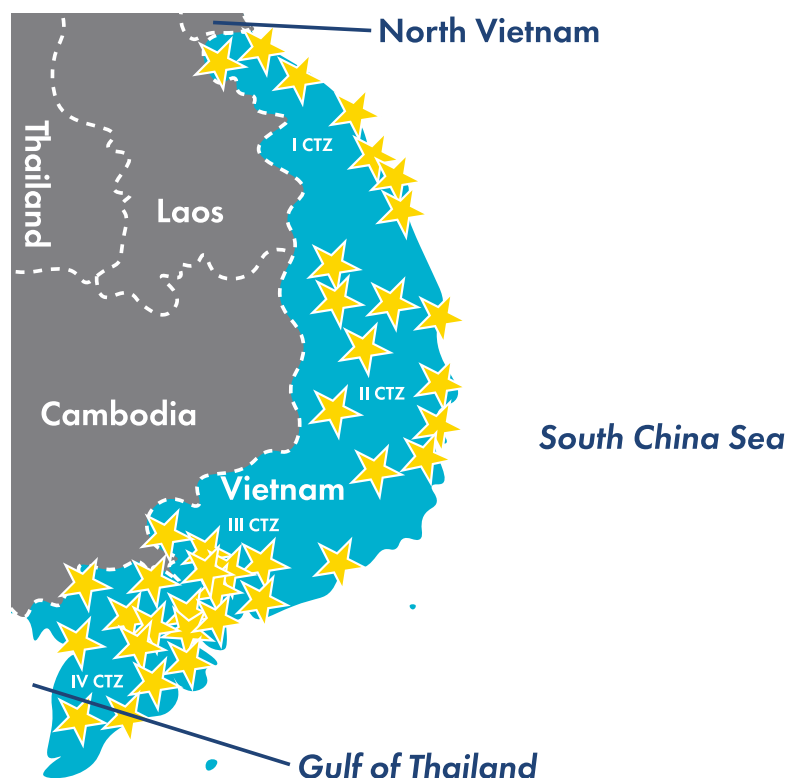
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1. The Tet Offensive

Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril. —Sun Tzu (Griffith, 1971)

“Crack the sky, shake the earth” was the command given to over 84,000 fighters of the People’s Army of Viet Nam (PAVN) and communist Viet Cong (VC) revolutionaries in South Vietnam in the early morning of January 30th, 1968 (Brimelow, 2021). The Tet Offensive, also known as the Tong Cong Kich/Tong Khoi Ngia (TCK/TKN) or General Offensive–General Uprising in Vietnamese, caught the allied forces of the US Military Assistance Command Vietnam and the South Vietnamese Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) completely off guard. Instead of observing a ceasefire for Tet, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year, VC units infiltrated cities and outposts from within the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the south, while PAVN units stormed across the Cambodian border and Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) from without. Except for a few VC brigades that were unaware of a 24-hour delay (Prados, 1993), the offensive was initiated across the country almost simultaneously. 36 out of 44 Southern Vietnamese population

centres were assaulted, including the previously untouched RVN capital, Saigon (Brimelow, 2021). This radical departure from irregular tactics to a more conventional offensive aimed to catalyse a popular uprising among the Southern Vietnamese, engulf the Allied forces in bloody urban fighting and potentially overthrow the South Vietnamese government to force a negotiated withdrawal of US forces and a subsequent communist takeover. On the military level, the Tet Offensive was admittedly a tactical catastrophe. Despite initial successes, PAVN forces were decimated by overwhelming American firepower, especially while defending captured positions. The VC displayed an unprecedented level of offensive coordination, but sacrificed the bulk of their offensive potential for the rest of the war. US and ARVN forces successfully counterattacked, and within two months had returned virtually all of the territory they had ceded. The North Vietnamese even failed to trigger the popular uprising they had expected in the wake of the offensive and grossly underestimated the strength and resilience of the ARVN (Pribbenow, 2008).



Tet Offensive 1968

★ Engagement

0 50 Miles
0 50 Kilometers

Figure 1: A number of North Vietnamese targets during the 1968 Tet Offensive ("Map south Vietnam - Tet offensive 1968" by Tommy Japan 79 is licensed under: CC BY 2.0.)

On the political level, however, the Tet Offensive remains the seminal moment for US withdrawal. After several years of guerrilla fighting had ground to a positional fight, the PAVN and VC had delivered a daring strike quite literally into the homes of oblivious US and South Vietnamese coalition forces. The offensive was widely televised to horrified viewers back in the US, including the inconceivable infiltration of the American embassy in Saigon on the second day (Robbins, 2010). After Walter Cronkite, CBS news anchor and the “most trusted man in America”, returned after the Tet Offensive in February to tell the nation that the war had regrettably become a stalemate, US President Lyndon B. Johnson allegedly told associates, “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost Middle America” (Wicker, 1997). Johnson would refuse to seek reelection in the 1968 electoral campaign, thereby abandoning responsibility for the war to the next administration. What had occurred was a tremendous underestimation by the leadership of the US forces under General William C. Westmoreland. Despite US and RVN intelligence collecting considerable elements of information indicating the intent, scale and even direction of a significant North Vietnamese attack, the early warning was missed due to fundamental misconceptions about the nature of the adversary, the war, and the American public. The consequences of the underestimation proved catastrophic in the long run: the episode obstructed political support for the escalation of American commitment previously feared by the North Vietnamese and shattered public perceptions about the war.

2. The Political Calculus of Hanoi’s War

In retrospect, the communist Vietnamese had made visible a vulnerability that American strategists, policymakers, and generals have struggled to correct since the withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam. As James Robbins (2010) argued, the Tet Offensive is an inspiration for asymmetrical foes who, by using sudden and unanticipated violence, can facilitate potentially fatal political costs regardless of the achievement of immediate tactical objectives. The American politician is fundamentally risk-averse and

wants short, winnable conventional wars with low, measurable costs, not protracted, low-intensity stalemates. Shock attacks introduce an uncomfortable uncertainty that complicates the former and threatens the latter. So long as the adversary can then maintain fighting, the US will eventually be compelled to fold. The Americans may have the watches, but their adversaries have the time (Nagl, 2022). In practice, the US’s adversaries have repeatedly reaffirmed what they view, according to Robbins, as its “Achilles heel” (2010, 51). In June 2004, then US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld said that Iraqi insurgents had “read about Tet and the fact that if they make a big enough splash, even though they get a lot of people killed and we pound them, they end up winning psychologically” (Robbins, 2010, 54). In 2006, Hassan Nasrallah, then leader of Hezbollah, was inspired by the “lesson of Vietnam” when he argued that the US would leave the Middle East “like they left Vietnam” and abandon those who placed their trust in the US “to their fate, just like they did to all those who placed their trust in them throughout history” (Robbins, 2010, 51-52). More recently, Russian political commentary claimed that victory in the war against Ukraine involves simply waiting out the supply of Western military aid (Soltys, 2023). Back in 1968, the Communists had yet to test this vulnerability, but similar thinking had been familiar to them for decades. The Tet Offensive concept was first referenced in 1947 in the context of the decolonisation struggle in French Indochina, where Party Secretary Truong Chinh envisioned that their final victory would be achieved through widespread attacks on urban centres coordinated with fomented uprisings. Even though French withdrawal was secured after victory at Dien Bien Phu and not in the cities as Chinh had predicted, the Communists nonetheless believed that domestic disenchantment was the critical factor for this “decisive victory” (Ford, 1995). The Communists had considered an operation similar to the Tet Offensive based on these principles as early as 1960 but worried about American escalation and the readiness of the VC. As the war progressed, both of these factors were less applicable, and the vulnerabilities of the US became more apparent. In April 1966, PAVN General Nguyen Van Vinh

argued to his VC counterparts that: In a war of position, they can defeat us. But with our present tactics, we will win and they will be defeated. It is the same as if we force them to eat with chopsticks. If we eat with spoons and forks like them, we will be defeated; if chopsticks are used, they are no match for us. (Ford, 1995, 66) Leading up to the Tet Offensive, the Vietnamese communists were motivated and far from capitulation. But the fighting had already proven costly, with American bombing campaigns decimating Northern Vietnamese populated areas and displacing hundreds of thousands. The Communist Party's assessment before 1968 was that while they had successfully managed to prevent an American victory, they were also unable to achieve their own victory. By July 1967, the Politburo resolved that a vigorous and sudden attack was needed to win the war before Americans could commit more resources and overwhelm the precarious strategic

balance (Guan, 1998). It officially adopted the strategy in Resolution 13 that month and began to prepare officers in the necessary tactics (Guan, 1998). The turnaround from theory to plan was hasty but understandable. Hanoi was cognisant that the American elections in late 1968 would present a brief opportunity to "force the American ruling circles to make a decision on whether or not to end the war" (Ford, 1995, 64). The objectives of this upcoming phase of "winning decisive victory" were finalised in early January 1968 at a plenary session of the Communist Party's Central Committee (Guan, 1998). Firstly, the Communists needed to exploit a strategic opportunity to shift the war from the stalemate. Secondly, they had to stretch US and ARVN units away from the urban targets. Thirdly, they had to deal a "thundering blow" to change the "face of the war" and compel the US to de-escalate and seek a negotiated withdrawal (Guan, 1998, 351).



Figure 2 – US Marines injured in the Battle of Hue, arguably the bloodiest urban battle of the war, during the Tet Offensive receive treatment. ("Hue Tet Offensive, 1968" by TommyJapan1, CC BY 2.0)

3. Underestimation, the Child of Cognitive Dissonance

The Tet Offensive was thus not merely a reaction to the realities of the war but an inevitability derived from deep within Vietnamese strategic thinking. Certainly, direct insights into an adversary's high-level thought are a difficult task for espionage, but more scrutiny of the circumstances up to January 1968 could well have laid bare Hanoi's plan. But, as Col. John Hughes-Wilson explained: In the great majority of cases, defeat can usually be traced back to a lack of knowledge of the enemy. Whether from overconfidence, ignorance, gullibility or just a failure to comprehend the facts, military defeat is almost invariably associated with an intelligence defeat. (Hughes-Wilson, 1999, 3) American underestimation was no different. Cognitive dissonance simply prevented US FORCES and

the Combined Intelligence Centre (CIC), the main joint American-South Vietnamese intelligence unit, from discovering the decisive victory strategy or providing early warning

for such a manoeuvre. These conceptions persisted despite repeated evidence supporting a large-scale buildup. The CIC had evidently drawn few lessons when similarly erroneous assumptions by Israel's military intelligence wing made them fail to predict the surprise attack by Egypt and Syria on Yom Kippur a year before (Kahana, 2002). Indeed, although the Politburo stressed the importance of operational secrecy (Guan, 1998), the Communists would find it impossible to hide the buildup and planning of a strategic operation of that magnitude. As Carl von Clausewitz once noted: Surprise is a tactical device, simply because in tactics time and space are limited in scale. Therefore in strategy, surprise becomes more feasible the closer it occurs to the tactical realm, and more difficult, the more it approaches the higher levels of policy. Preparations for war usually take months. Concentrating troops at their main assembly points generally requires the installation of supply dumps and depots, as well as

considerable troop movements, whose purpose can be guessed soon enough. It is very rare therefore that one state surprises another, either by an attack or by preparations for war. (Clausewitz et al., 1989, 198-199) American intelligence thus observed a gradual increase in infiltration of South Vietnam and an increase in shipments observed along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, from 55 trucks in September 1966 to between 695 and 4,235 in December 1967 (Prados, 1993). On numerous occasions, the CIC was also gifted captured documents that put the Tet Offensive's operational secrecy in jeopardy. A document captured by the ARVN in October 1967 explicitly mentioned the Tet Offensive and plans for an offensive coinciding with a countrywide uprising. In November, a military

directive by the South Vietnamese communists was uncovered that mentioned the North Vietnamese intended to goad the redeployment of American troops away to the border

with coordinated attacks (Prados, 1993). Then a low-ranking cadre was captured with the "Quang Tin Document," an order that indicated Hanoi perceived US political will as sufficiently weak to make a „decisive victory“ possible (Ford, 1995). A week later, the contents of a captured notebook mentioning Resolution 13 and emphasising a "general counteroffensive and general uprising" ordered by Hanoi were circulated multiple times between November and early January (Prados, 1993). A potentially deliberately misleading directive was captured on December 16th calling for the use of the Tet holiday truce for resupply and training and, ironically, became part of a press release in January called "Captured Document Indicates Viet Cong Plan to Take Advantage of Cease-Fire" (Prados, 1993). In January in particular, the intelligence was almost farcically revealing. Documents were captured revealing attack plans for specific cities in the South. A group of VC were captured by RVN counterintelligence

**„Whether from overconfidence, (...) gullibility or just a failure to comprehend the facts, military defeat is almost invariably associated with an intelligence defeat.“
– Colonel John Hughes-Wilson, 1999**



with a tape recording to be broadcast over the radio that claimed the major cities of Hue, Da Nang and Saigon were already controlled by the VC. On January 28, human intelligence revealed VC artillery and infantry regiments prepared to assault Bien Hoa. Some North Vietnamese even attacked a day before the planned start date for the Tet Offensive (Prados, 1993). All in all, the Americans and South Vietnamese had considerable and often explicit intelligence revealing the existence, timing and location of the Tet Offensive. Yet these early warnings went unheeded because entrenched opinion in American command was that the PAVN and VC were both too attrited and operationally incapable of an offensive of such a scale (Guan, 1998; Ovodenko, 2011). Gen. Westmoreland boasted that the rate of replacement of North Vietnamese casualties was negative enough that the US could plan for victorious withdrawals in 1969 (Prados, 1993). However, these casualty and 'order of battle' estimates used either insufficient data or were deliberately manipulated to bolster domestic support (Wirtz, 1991; Ovodenko, 2011). Communist intentions derived from document captures were dismissed as either indoctrinated propaganda or not substantially departing from previous statements and intelligence earlier in the war (Ovodenko, 2011). Analysts in the theatre, like those at the Saigon Station, were also accused of overreacting to speculation (Ford, 2024). Eventually, as the rate of assaults rose and the intelligence grew increasingly unsettling, Gen. Westmoreland shifted focus to Khe Sanh near the DMZ, where PAVN troops were expected to launch a siege in early January 1968, mimicking the infamous battle of Dien Bien Phu (Ovodenko, 2011). In reality, the imminent assaults were part of a larger deception strategy, as outlined in some of the captured documents, to redeploy troops away from urban centres and to see whether US forces might respond with an incursion into North Vietnam itself (Ford, 1995). The Communists were wilfully playing into American conceptions of a desperate enemy and further diverting attention away from the Southern areas they intended to target (Prados, 1993; Ford,

1995). When Gen. Westmoreland responded to the Khe Sanh assaults in mid-January with reinforcements and massive aerial bombing—but no counterattack to the north—the PAVN were reassured of their strategy. Some voices attempted to raise alarm. David Mozingo wrote a paper in 1966, based on open-source texts and captured intelligence, for the RAND Corporation in which he surmised that the Communists would switch to large, mobile offensives to create intense political pressure (Elliott & Thomson, 2010). Mozingo argued they believed they could trigger the collapse of a weak RVN and accelerate US withdrawal by confronting Washington with an endless war. His analysis was rejected, despite largely relying on evidence from the Communists themselves, because it contradicted the conventional wisdom that the PAVN and VC were depleted. Likewise, the CIA's Saigon Station predicted an unprecedented "all-out attack", even explicitly referring to the Tet Offensive by name and unwittingly

concluding that the "outcome of the 1967-68 winter-spring campaign will in all likelihood deter-

mine the future direction of the war" (Prados, 1993, 174). It is possible that much of this intelligence was simply ignored. "It is revealing that President Johnson's memoirs," said former NSC staff officer C.L. Cooper in 1984, "which are replete with references to and long quotations from documents which influenced his thinking and decisions on Vietnam, contain not a single reference to a National Intelligence Estimate or, indeed, to any other intelligence analysis" (Ford, 2024, 38). General Frederick Weyand, tasked with the defence of Saigon, and Captain Robert Simmons discovered that the VC had reorganised their command zones in wedges pointed directly at the capital just before the Tet holiday. Gen. Weyand subsequently managed to convince Gen. Westmoreland to redeploy at least some battalions to defend Saigon, a decision the latter called "one of the most critical of the Vietnam War" (Ovodenko, 2011, 133). Nonetheless, half of South Vietnamese personnel were granted holiday leave, so many ARVN units were only at 10-20% strength (Prados, 1993). On the night of the Tet Offensive, many key senior US

The Americans may have the watches, but their adversaries have the time.



officers, including Gen. Westmoreland, awoke to the sound of shooting just outside their residences. Col. George Jacobsen, a senior CIA official living in the Saigon embassy, defended himself with a pistol after VC broke into the compound (Prados, 1993).

4. Conclusion

The Tet Offensive illustrates a deeply perplexing situation: military intelligence had potent evidence of upcoming hostile operations, the general staff was keenly aware an attack was imminent, and yet stubborn myopia prevented military and political leadership from seeing the larger picture. Underestimations of PAVN/VC strength, resolve, and war aims persisted despite collected intelligence that contradicted entrenched conceptions. The intelligence was so glaring in hindsight that some officers involved in the failure would later have the audacity to claim that they knew all along. "We were not surprised by the fact of the Tet Offensive," said General Daniel O. Graham to a congressional committee in 1975, "what surprised us was the rashness of the Tet attacks" (Prados, 1993, 161-162). The corollary lesson is that the Tet Offensive represented a

significant intelligence success for the North Vietnamese. Although relatively lacking in intelligence-gathering and resources, they accurately estimated their adversary's vulnerabilities and formulated an ambitious strategy to take advantage of them and exploited American preconceptions to deceive US forces and deny them the ability to prepare appropriately. Admittedly, the Tet Offensive was a desperate and extremely costly gamble, and Communist intelligence itself erred in some tactical and strategic respects, but it was successful in the long run. The contemporary and future consequences for American foreign policy were enormous. Not only was Tet a crucial blow to the US's capacity to fight the war, but it undermined their ability to fight future wars as well. US General Jack Keane noted in 2006: After the Vietnam War, we purged ourselves of everything that had to do with irregular warfare or insurgency, because it had to do with how we lost that war. In hindsight, that was a bad decision. (Nagl, 2022, 15) The PAVN and VC not only succeeded in their war aims, but also unknowingly forced into existence a prism through which every subsequent strategic American setback would inevitably be viewed.

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Vincent Sipeer

Entering a New Phase of Geopolitical De-Risking

Sister City Partnerships in the US as Gateways of Chinese Influence

About the Article

Can U.S. cities protect themselves from foreign influence? As Sino-U.S. sister city partnerships come under growing scrutiny, Vincent Sipeer examines how local diplomacy has become an overlooked front in great power competition. He argues that while China’s tightly coordinated system gives it an asymmetric advantage, the U.S. must not emulate authoritarian control. Instead, he calls for a new strategy of geopolitical de-risking—one that builds local capacity, strengthens multi-level coordination, and safeguards democratic integrity in city-to-city relations.

About the Author

Vincent Sipeer is pursuing a M.A. in National and International Administration and Policy at the University of Potsdam (DE). His research focuses on climate and energy policy, sustainable development and transatlantic security. Vincent’s professional interests center on EU legislative and regulatory affairs, with a particular focus on policy analysis. Currently, he is a Fulbright fellow at the Middlebury Institute, California (US).

1. A new phase for city diplomacy

After World War II, U.S. President Eisenhower (1953 to 1961) initially started sponsoring sister city agreements. In 1956, the White House Conference on Citizen Diplomacy marked the capstone of local people-to-people diplomacy, laying a foundation for pursuing world peace (Sister Cities International, 2025). Formal, long-term cooperations between municipalities and provinces of different nations, negotiated by their official representatives, became an established instrument in the external relations of cities (Acuto et al, 2018). Currently, there are around 286 Sino-U.S. sister city partnerships (Belt and Road Portal, 2024) concerned with projects of U.S. companies in China, Chinese investments in the U.S., and various cultural, educational and professional people-to-people exchanges and cooperations. As U.S.-China great power competition resurges in areas of global trade, new and emerging technology, hybrid defense and global infrastructure, times have dramatically changed (CFR, 2025). Sister-city relationships between the U.S. and its major antagonist on the global stage are no longer framed as initiatives that are promoting understanding between nations but as gateways of influence. A former U.S. Secretary of State warned, “China is aggressively attempting to influence state and local governments, including through seemingly innocuous sister-city agreements” (AP, 2020). Traditionally apolitical sister-city agreements turned into a bone of contention. The right approach is vigorously discussed as the case of the Washington Sister Cities Act (2025) demonstrates. In 1984, Washington D.C. officially became Beijing’s sister city. More than forty years later, a range of concerns spur a debate on whether U.S. cities should generally suspend Sino-U.S. city agreements. Several legislators around Rep. Moolenaar (R-MI-2) called the Mayor of Washington D.C. Bowser (D-DC) to review and to end the sister city arrangement. The initiative intends to terminate and to prohibit municipalities in the District of Columbia from entering city sister relationships with foreign adversaries (U.S. Congress, 2025). The asymmetry between the authoritarian Chinese system and the lax U.S. framework for city diplomacy is associa-

ted with underestimated vulnerabilities of U.S. national security. Key element to closing those vulnerabilities include enhanced tactical alignment on activities that cities engage in, strategic coherence, operational coordination and tactical alignment of city diplomacy with national security priorities. In the worst case, U.S. cities send out conflicting signals, create risks for concerned parties and expose unprotected entry points to foreign influence. This article thus examines how U.S. cities can navigate geopolitical de-risking and close vulnerabilities related to Sino-U.S. sister city partnerships.

2. Cities in a heterarchical world

The burgeoning academic subfield of city diplomacy spans the research areas of International Relations and urban studies (Amiri & Sevin, 2020; Marchetti, 2021). Modern city diplomacy is a phenomenon of a plural and heterarchical international political system in transition. As there are frequent multilateral interactions between global cities, national governments and non-governmental actors (Acuto, 2013), city diplomacy can be understood as a facet of pluralism of global entities (Cornago, 2010). Urban diplomacy resonates with a world order in which national government no longer solely determine the rules. City governments therefore pursue to assume policy arenas that traditionally are national domains (Koehn & Rosenau, 2002). Examples are local aspects of migration management, technology policy, resilience building, democratic renewal, environmental and climate action. Also, city diplomacy resonates with a world order described as heterarchical. Heterarchy is a global governance system with overlapping hierarchies and each respective governing principles (Cerny, 2023). For example, after the U.S. federal government announced its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2017, cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles stepped up their pragmatic efforts to claim the lead. 294 U.S. cities and counties voluntarily recommitted to uphold the targets through the “We Are Still In” (2025) initiative. City diplomacy is discussed as

a subtype of paradiplomacy, an acronym for parallel diplomacy (Butler, 1962). It encompasses activities of either “supporting, complementing, correcting, duplicating, or challenging the nation-states’ diplomacy” (Soldatos 1990, p. 17) and mostly operates “through permanent or ad hoc contacts with foreign public or private entities, with the aim of promoting socioeconomic or cultural issues” (Cornago 1999, p. 40). Cities engage with global affairs “with the aim of representing themselves and their interests” (Van der Pluijm, 2007, p. 6). In their capacity as diplomatic players (Tavares, 2016), cities have multi-scalar agency, meaning their representatives have ties across all governmental levels. Parallel to nation states that conduct relations by official agents and peaceful means, cities facilitate communication, negotiate bilateral agreements, and symbolise the existence of an international society (Bull, 1995). To this end, cities send delegations, open foreign offices, and organise business missions, partly mimicking national diplomacy. Second, cities are credible trust-brokers for interests of local communities, e.g., infrastructure projects, innovation ecosystems and sustainable development. Third, cities deliver on their mandate by leveraging their unique Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO)-like agility through global alliance building. Cities establish organisations under private law, such as global city networks (Acuto, 2013; Bouteligier, 2012).

3. A world of difference

There’s a world of difference between PRC and U.S. city diplomacy approaches. Considering different political regimes and modes of inter-agency coordination, Chinese city diplomacy is aligned with national objectives, while in the U.S. representative democracy cities claim self-governance. Local leaders in the U.S. act relatively autonomous and serve their mandate independently from national politics (Bursens & Deforche, 2010). The federal system allows sub-national governments a room for maneuver to pursue local interests, regardless of the ca-

pital’s concerns (Hoover Institution, 2018). The role of the U.S. Department of State (DOS) in urban diplomacy has been historically weak and limited. In contrast, in the PRC, a centralised authoritarian system with a vertically integrated governance, cities operate under tight Chinese Communist Party (CCP) control. The PRC’s policy is to “use sister city relations to expand China’s economic agenda separate to a given nation’s foreign policy.” (Brady, 2017, p. 9). An arrangement of different entities determines how China’s cities engage with U.S. counterparts. The United Front Work Department (UFWD) and the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) are in charge of cultural and social outreach abroad through China’s influence campaigns (De La Bruyere & Picarsic, 2021; De La Bruyère, 2023; Toi-Yeung & Möller, 2024). The CPAFFC is supposed to oversee sister people-to-people, city-city and enterprise-to-foreign-enterprise activities to execute China’s global

**Sister city partnership:
A formal, long-term
cooperation of communities in
different states.**



agenda (Lulu, 2019). According to the U.S. Department of State, the CPAFFC “has sought to directly and malignly influence state

and local leaders to promote the PRC’s global agenda” (DOS, 2020). The CPAFFC is subordinate to the UNFWD. Sister-city agreements must be approved by the Chinese Foreign Ministry (Yan, 2023). CPAFFC “officials build personal relationships than can then be ‘weaponized’ when a city plans an activity the CCP does not like” (Hamilton & Ohlberg, 2020, p. 91). Relevant political issues for China are the protest and massacre on the Tiananmen Square 1989, the autonomy of Hong Kong, the independence of Tibet, the status of Taiwan, or human rights conditions in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), e.g. genocidal policies against ethnic minorities. Chinese city diplomacy is thus understood as an extension of Chinese interests and geostrategic power (Xiong & Wang, 2013; Zhao & Chen, 2013). In stark contrast to the U.S., there is inter-agency coordination of city diplomacy action in place and interactions are under tight control. From a comparative perspective, U.S. city diplomacy takes place in bottom-up, city-to-city partnership driven by local needs.

Local officials can take decisions without interference by federal authorities. In contrast, China pursues a top-down, whole-of-government approach, embedded in national strategy. Chinese city diplomacy is strategically aligned and politically subordinate to the ostensibly all-powerful CCP national foreign policy objectives. However, Chinese cities usually maintain divers and substantial subnational cooperation over a long time as long as they serve and follow Beijing's foreign policy lead.

4. Global expansion of partnerships

Over time, Chinese sister city partnerships created an ever-denser global network. The first Chinese sister-city partnership was established between Beijing and Tokyo,

Japan, in 1979. China's economic opening through the Deng Xiaoping's 1978 reforms built trust and prosperity through commercial cooperation as a bulwark of better Sino-U.S. relations. In the 1990s and 2000s opportunities for economic cooperation in the Global East became more relevant for the PRC. After the financial crisis of 2008 until 2019, there was a witnessed rapid expansion of partnerships with developing countries (Xu, Liu & Huang, 2023) (see Figure 1). In particular, cities with industrial relevance for global supply chains and logistics infrastructure are of profound interest. City diplomacy is at the focus of China's geopolitical outreach and thus a powerful indicator to trace the People's Republic's global ambitions.

1978 and 1980

Opening policy and economic growth



1990s and 2000s

Economic cooperation between countries in the Global East

2010s and 2020s

Strengthening global influence and outreach

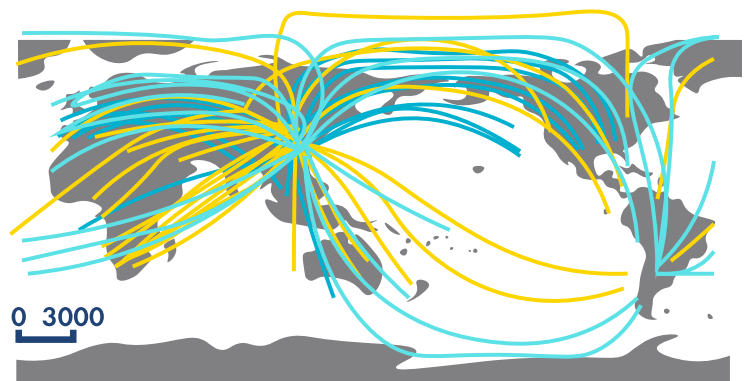


Figure 1: Evolution of Chinese transnational city partnerships (Source: Xu, Liu & Huang, 2023).

The total number of sister relationships differ, depending on the source. Most sources refer to a number around 286 pairs of sister relationship between the U.S. cities and counties and Chinese counterparts (Belt and Road Portal, 2024). By 2019, roughly 2,600 Chinese municipalities had foreign sister cities or provinces all around the globe, including about 200 in the U.S. and 700 in Europe (Gottlieb, 2023). According to People’s Daily, since the mid-1950s China has even established over 2,900 pairs of sister cities with more than 140 countries (Gering, 2025). The resource endowment of cities within the Sino-North American sister city network are a significant factor for the development of sister city partnerships (Wu, Li & Hu, 2018). Long-term and reliable city-to-city relations across the Pacific are established between, e.g. San Francisco and Shanghai (1979), Seattle-Chongqing (1983), Orlando-Guilin (1986) and Houston-Shenzhen (1986). The U.S. states with the most sister partnerships with cities in the entire Indo-Pacific region are California (245), followed at some distance, by Washington (73), Texas (47), Florida (33), Oregon (38) and Indiana (35) (Asia Matters for America/America Matters for Asia, 2022).

5. Gateways of Chinese influence

Literature on derisking of city diplomacy addresses risks that can be understood as “vulnerabilities to local development obstacles, damages, and biases stemming from a subnational government’s international activities” (Grandi & Sottilotta, 2024, p. 3). More precisely, geopolitical risks are arising from cities’ exposure to geopolitical shifts and power dynamics in international relations (Grandi & Sottilotta, 2025; Campisi et al., 2025). As U.S.-China great power competition resurges, the era of naïve global engagement is over. The operative environment of city diplomats is “the front lines of national security [as] leaders at the U.S. state, local, tribal, and territorial levels risk being manipulated to support hidden PRC agendas. PRC influence operations can be deceptive and coercive” (National Counterintelligence and Security Center, 2022, p.1). Three vulnerabilities of adverse urban diplomacy stand out, namely investments into critical infrastructure, infiltration by illegal agents and influence of subsidiary entities. As the National Counterintelligence and Security Center indicates, China’s official goals can diverge from covered goals (NCSC, 2022). This threat vector matrix illustrates which covered adverse policy goals are associated with different areas of city-to-city engagement.

Threat vectors	Areas of engagement	Covered adverse goals
Investments into urban critical infrastructure	Economic cooperation	Co-ownership of major infrastructures, industrial espionage, intellectual property (IP) theft
Infiltration by illegal foreign agents	Hidden political activities	Information acquisition, interference into democratic decision-making processes
Influence of foreign subsidiary entities	Cultural and social cooperation	Influence on public opinion through disinformation and propaganda Controlling and policing the diaspora

Figure 2: Threat vectors, areas of engagement and goals of adverse city diplomacy (source: Own compilation).

The threat vectors related to adverse city diplomacy shall be illustrated with cases from the State of California. First, sister city relationships can enhance a city's attractiveness to foreign investors and can have long-term, positive effect on Chinese outward foreign direct investment (Han, 2020; He, Tang & Wei, 2025). However, adverse city diplomacy can open gateways for co-ownership of critical infrastructures. One case for short-sighted local decisions on critical infrastructure investments is the Long Beach container terminal. After national-security review of the Chinese shipping cooperation's interests in the terminal, U.S. authorities required divestiture because of national security concerns (OOCL, 2019). Second, sister city relationships can foster close political relations between local elites and communities, but they can also provide open backdoors for infiltration by illegal foreign agents or the recruitment of political staff as proxies for political advocacy (DHS, 2020). For example, in the City of Arcadia, Los Angeles County, a Chinese illegal agent of the PRC tried to manipulate an election and reported to Chinese officials about how to influence local US politicians (U.S. Attorney's Office, 2025). Also, sister city relationships can create bias that make local leaders careless against threats related to foreign subsidiary entities. They can be platforms for influence campaigns on public opinion through disinformation and propaganda and abet controlling and policing of overseas communities. A case of manipulation of public opinion through disinformation and social control happened during the Chinese President's visit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation conference. In San Francisco pro-CCP diaspora groups, possibly linked to Chinese consular officials, were accused of organising demonstrators to counter Tibet and pro-Taiwan protesters (Washington Post, 2024). This case shows how China's extraterritorial reach in the U.S. can materialise in social discourse framing (Wong, 2022). While the number of Confucius Institutes in the U.S. dramatically collapsed between 2019 and 2024 (U.S. GAO, 2023), other problematic foreign subsidiary entities are still locally involved in the U.S.

As U.S.-China great power competition resurges, the era of naïve global engagement is over.

Considering an engagement of Californian representatives with the CPAFFC, e.g. in the Bay-to-Bay Dialogue, higher awareness of PRC's strategic operations to exploit unfair advantages is urgency needed (CSIS, 2023).

6. Multi-level diplomacy framework

An U.S. multi-level diplomacy framework is evolving gradually. In 1979, the State Department created an Ambassador-at-Large for Liaison with State and Local Government, but since then, similar functions concerned with city diplomacy have been temporary stand-alone offices. A remarkable legislative step forward was introduced by Rep. Lieu (D-CA-33) and Rep. Wilson (R-SC-2) in 2019. The City and State Diplomacy Act (2019) created an office of subnational diplomacy within the U.S. Department of State. Rep. Lieu argues the act helps us push back global competitors by giving local leaders the tools needed to navigate foreign pressure and exploitation. Federal support could leverage the expertise, talent, and energy of local and regional officials (Lieu, 2022). Also, since 2019, the State Department has required Chinese diplomats seeking to meet with state and local leaders in the U.S. to notify it in advance (New York Times, 2019). In 2020, Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn) and then-Senator David Perdue (R-GA) introduced the City and State Diplomacy Act (2020) in the Senate. The legislative proposal has received bipartisan support and found its way into the House's Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022. In the last years, de-risking approach shaped the legislation on city diplomacy. Since 2020, the Special Representative for City and State Diplomacy offers customised China briefings to governors' and mayors' offices that request them, enabling the Department of State to fill Chinese influence analysis, and strategies for counteraction (DOS, n.d.). In 2024 the US House of Representatives hold the so-called China week with 25 bills related to technology and trade-related risks, countermeasures against economic espionage, and restrictions on Confucius Institutes

(Morgan Lewis, 2024). On state level, in 2024 Indiana introduced provision prohibiting local governments from entering into sister-city agreements with units located in states designated a foreign adversary (Indiana House of Representatives Bill 1120, 2024). In 2025, the Arkansas “Communist China Defense” package and the Texas Government Code restrict establishing sister-city relationships with prohibited foreign parties (Arkansas House of Representatives Bill 1352, 2025; Texas House of Representatives Bill TX HB128, 2025).

7. Geopolitical derisking

The current U.S. city diplomacy polity framework is ill-equipped to execute geopolitical derisking. In a 2020 survey of 47 global cities by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 78 percent of respondents said they would engage more in city diplomacy if they had dedicated funds (Kosovac et. al., 2020). Compared to their counterparts in Western Europe, Japan, and certain cities in Latin America, U.S. city diplomacy units are understaffed. For example, Tokyo and Buenos Aires each employ a 40-person international affairs team focused on city diplomacy, while the largest international affairs offices in the U.S. are in Los Angeles and New York City, each with only 10-12 staffers (Bouchet, 2024). In the U.S. most “state and local governments do not have the capacity to track Beijing’s influence tactics and do full due diligence on what may be involved in economic offers from Chinese companies” (Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2025, p. 8f.). This can result in administrative overload and under-coverage of foreign threats. In the worst case, cities undermine their immanent interests, engage in dangerous silo thinking, send out conflicting policy signals, create risks for concerned parties and expose unprotected entry points to foreign influence. I thus argue in favour for a new approach to counter geopolitical threats of adverse city diplomacy. Such a multi-level de-risking strategy on city diplomacy would create better strategic coherence, foster operational coordination and enhance tactical alignment. First, geopolitical de-risking of city diplomacy requires strategic coherence of guiding principles such as

transparency, integrity and reciprocity of safe city-to-city relations. Cities should ensure full transparency in dealings with Chinese entities by making agreements public, holding hearings, and applying the same legal standards used for American partnerships. Cities should strengthen integrity by understanding influence operations, staying updated on Washington’s China policies, and consulting federal agencies. However, cities shall avoid short-term and opportunistic engagements, measure impacts of and integrate local demands into international agendas (Acuto et al., 2018). They must also promote beneficial reciprocity of partnerships by tracing the origins of foreign investments, identifying ties to malicious influence networks, and ensuring fair treatment of controversial issues (Hoover, 2018). Second, geopolitical de-risking of city diplomacy requires operational coordination of knowledge and information capacities. Associations such as the National Conference of Mayors shall strengthen networking activities to share best and worst practice experiences and raise awareness for geopolitical challenges for city diplomacy. Think-tanks, e.g. the Truman Center for National Policy, the Brookings Institution, the RAND Corporation/ USC Center on Public Diplomacy and the Council of Global Affairs shall continue valuable research on risks related to foreign investments and foreign subsidiary entities. Also, an underexploited asset are resources from private security partners and the philanthropic sector. Third, geopolitical de-risking of city diplomacy requires tactical alignment of multi-level risk management. Grandi & Sottilotta (2025) recommend that an independent national city diplomacy office shall provide consultation, monitor threats, and support risk assessments of city administrations. This would “empower U.S. state and local governments to make informed decisions about the PRC.” (...) “Congress should strengthen the Subnational Diplomacy Unit to make its counter-China efforts more robust” (Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2025, p. 8). The Subnational Diplomacy Unit and the FBI provide briefings and conducted outreach to state and local governments involved in subnational US-Chinese city diplomacy. Moreover, the unit should set clear guidelines for interaction with Chinese counterparts, ensure regular communication and

consultations between cities and federal partners (Jaros & Newland, 2025). It should map the extent influence activities, utilise existing city and state diplomacy toolkits, assess and update existing laws on foreign interference and transparency and provide specialised training (Gering, 2025). When assistance for local threat analysis is necessary, U.S. cities should even have the opportunity to go up the chain of command and request prompt briefings from clearance-bearing personnel within the intelligence community. Cities are recommended to communicate initial suspicion of potential foreign influence with U.S. intelligence agencies, including regional fusion centers, local FBI offices and U.S. Department of Homeland Security (NSCS, 2022).

8. Conclusion

While Chinese city diplomacy is strategically aligned with national objectives, U.S. counterparts have more leeway. For the time being, the U.S. city diplomacy framework is

ill-equipped for respective geopolitical derisking on a local level. In times in which city diplomacy is used as a tool for strengthening China's economic, ideological and cultural influence, vulnerabilities and threats should deserve increased attention. The U.S. should avoid replicating the top-down authoritarian Chinese approach. The U.S. needs a security strategy on city diplomacy that highlights capacity-building and multi-level risk management to prevent influence operations, safeguarding democratic integrity, economic openness and civil liberties of local communities. Key element to closing those vulnerabilities include strategic coherence, operational coordination and tactical alignment. Future research should map vulnerabilities related to transnational sister city partnerships and review local resources and procedures to secure city diplomacy action. It shall be discussed how transparency, accountability and integrity standards can be calibrated without local administrative overload or disproportionate national control.

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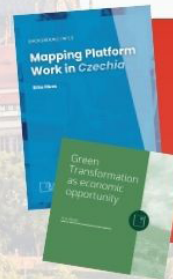
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Lenaïg Deslandes

Taiwan is not Ukraine

Understanding Sino-Russian Expansionist Strategies Beyond their Similarities

About the Article

Is Taiwan really the next Ukraine? Amid rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific, Lenaïg Deslandes challenges the increasingly common comparison between China's ambitions toward Taiwan and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. She argues that despite superficial similarities, the two powers' expansionist strategies diverge sharply—Russia favouring military revisionism, China pursuing gradual, grey-zone statecraft. By unpacking these differences, Deslandes cautions against simplistic parallels that obscure the distinct geopolitical realities shaping Taiwan's future.

About the Author

Lenaïg Deslandes holds a B.Sc. in International Relations and Organizations from Leiden University (NL). Her research focuses on US-China relations, international security, and space strategy.

1. Introduction

The black bear, endemic to Taiwan, is often illustrated as punching Winnie the Pooh, a cartoon character used as a pejorative analogy for President Xi Jinping, as depicted in Figure 1 (Plummer, 2023). Tenacious in their symbolism, the battle of the bears echoes the political resolve of the Taiwanese against their perceived oppressor. For the Taiwanese, an overt military conflict with China is seen as inevitable as academics prepare the next generation for war (Kuma Academy, 2025). The media often draws parallels between their situation with Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. It is thought that the ensuing economic sanctions and diplomatic backlash the Kremlin received post-February 2022 imposed a revision of the Politburo's One China policy towards Taiwan. The Politburo, the supreme decision-making body of the CCP, and its One China policy assert that Taiwan de jure belongs to mainland China. Both China and Russia are autocratic regimes laying claim to a democracy they share a history and language with and that is economically reliant upon them. Yet, as this essay will argue, these similarities are often too quickly and easily drawn. The similar circumstances faced by Ukraine and Taiwan are just that; the similarities do not hold in terms of the mechanics of the Chinese and Russian expansionary powers and the international status and influence of these two nations on the world stage. Effectively, this essay aims to refute the too-easily drawn-out parallels between Russia and China. This essay will therefore start by reviewing the comparisons between Russia with Ukraine and China with Taiwan, providing an overview of the arguments' literature employs to liken Ukraine to Taiwan. A second part will examine the quality of the Sino-Russian relationship as well as the differences in their foreign policy. Finally, a third part will discuss what such conceptions can indicate for the Taiwan contingency.

Taiwan contingency: A potential crisis or conflict arising from a Chinese attempt to forcibly unify Taiwan with the mainland and the international response it would trigger.



2. China is to Taiwan What Russia is to Ukraine

On December 12th, 2024, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte stated that members must ready themselves for war in the off-chance Russia comes victorious over Ukraine, allowing a possible opening for Chinese expansion toward Taiwan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China, 2024). Rutte posits that in a status quo where Russia is the winner, annexation of claimed territories could become normalised and international sanctions would be put on the back burner. In a time of turbulent international order, certain states, including China and Russia, were cited as threats to global peace and security. The media has rushed to draw parallels between the great powers. With assumedly undeniable similarities in their expansionist ambitions, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is perceived as a possible future for Taiwan that must be avoided.

Taiwan and Ukraine share many similarities. They are both democracies that neighbour significant autocratic regimes – regimes that lay claim to their national territories. They share a history and linguistic and ethnic ties with their neighbour, depend economically on them, as well as rely on the US and Western allies for national security (Köckritz, 2023). The Russo-Ukrainian war has several implications for Taiwan (Khrestin, 2023). Russia's invasion of Ukraine poses a concern for great power competition and escalating conflict in Europe and Asia, especially as the war of attrition is taking longer than planned. This rushed invasion of Ukraine was initially motivated by the weakening of Russian security and dignity; yet, Ukraine's continued resistance is contributing to this weakening ever still (Simes, 2024). Taiwanese leaders have been quick to express their support for Ukrainian citizens after the invasion, drawing parallels with their situation with China (Khrestin, 2023). Taiwan has since increased military spending and reinstated the one-year mandatory military service in 2022. The US has similarly renewed its multi-billion

USD commitment to Taiwan through weapons sales and national defence contributions (Khrestin, 2023). The Taiwan contingency now permeates global policy, with the US namely split between supporting Ukraine and Taiwan should China replicate and learn from the Kremlin. In response, much of Taiwanese policy oriented towards the Taiwan contingency echoes *si vis pacem, para bellum* (“if you want peace, be prepared for war”). In August 2022, the People’s Republic of China issued a white paper on its Taiwan policy, pointing to the inevitability of conflict if Taiwan continues to pursue its anti-China stance. US intelligence has corroborated this by stating that President Xi intends to prepare the People’s Liberation Army for conflict by 2027 (Yen, 2023). Some claim this is where Taiwan and Ukraine fundamentally differ: while Ukraine is a widely recognised country in the West, it had no explicit military strategy funneled by concerns of intervention. Taiwan’s partial support from the biggest military in the world and its domestic politics, schooling, and society dedicated to *si vis pacem, para bellum*, implicate a level of preparedness and support that is not comparable to pre-invasion Ukraine. The US has been much more vocal

concerning Taiwan compared to Ukraine, with US national security policy authority Elbridge Colby asserting that “Taiwan’s fall will be a disaster for American interests” (para. 2) in a Senate confirmation meeting in March 2025 (Lai, 2025). Russia and China’s relationship lies within four shared pillars: the US as common opposition in their geopolitical strategies (the Asia-Pacific for China, and Europe for Russia), authoritarian political systems, and economic capacities that rely on each other (Russian resources and Chinese manufacturing) (Rumer, 2024). The parallels shared between Russia and Ukraine, and China and Taiwan, are distinct and presumably undeniable, yet the similarities as presented are limited in their predictive powers. Ukraine and Taiwan are respectively economically dependent on Russia and China, great powers that both lay claim to their territory. They share history and culture, and with Russia and China so intrinsically politically linked, it creates a comparative narrative that is easy to follow. Yet, differences in the mechanisms of the two powers’ expansionist ambitions and the responding policies from Ukraine and Taiwan limit the conclusions drawn by the Russia-China parallel.



Figure 1: “Patches, worn by Taiwanese air force pilots, depicting a Formosan black bear holding Taiwan’s flag and punching Winnie the Pooh.” Photograph: Carlos García (Rawlins/Reuters) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/11/taiwan-jump-in-sales-for-air-force-badges-showing-bear-punching-winnie-the-pooh>

3. Comparing Sino-Russian Expansion Strategies

Common Conception: Russia and China as Fused Foreign Policy

Taiwan and Ukraine are so easily compared due to the often too-easily drawn parallels in Chinese and Russian expansionism. It is thought that China is focused on the Indo-Pacific, Russia on Eastern Europe, and that US national security is threatened by the Sino-Russian convergence being downplayed (Campbell, 2025). In June of 2013, at the International Economic Forum, President Putin declared a pivot to the Asia-Pacific. While the announcement was eclipsed by the seizure of Crimea in 2014 and the intervention in the Syrian Civil War in 2015, it marked the beginning of a Russian shift away from the Transatlantic and towards Eurasia (Campbell, 2025). This was largely realised to gain an ally, a strategic alignment with the PRC in order to dismantle US hegemony. In a 2017 statement, Putin claimed the “main struggle, which is now underway, is that for global leadership, and we are not going to contest China on this” (Campbell, 2025, para. 4). Though they may have similar goals, Sino-Russian politics are better characterised through friendship rather than an alliance (Roshchin, 2025). They most identifiably coordinate to support each other without the demands of an alliance. Russia is also often thought to be China’s subordinate, but in reality, they both have agency in the global arena and vocalise differing opinions, with different definitions of global governance and similar interests in multipolarity. They also act independently and pursue self-interest rather than coordinated action. They balance diplomatic coordination without hesitating to reproach each other. In February 2025, following President Trump’s call to Putin on negotiating a ceasefire with Ukraine, Putin followed up by calling with President Xi, outlining the negotiation terms (Roshchin, 2025). Their comparable foreign policies are thus not identical and fall short when being used to illustrate the similarities between Ukraine and Taiwan, diverging significantly.

Where Sino-Russian Foreign Policies Diverge

China has not intervened as Russia has in other countries and while both are assertive militarily, they are not to the same degree. President Putin has cultivated the image of a strongman whereas President Xi has invested in his image as a statesperson, emphasising common, shared good. In terms of action, Russia favours revisionism, allowing, for example, military escalation in the Middle East and post-Soviet sphere (Pisciotta, 2023). The Kremlin chooses to openly criticise NATO and continually threatens military force. Until February 2022, Russia had been successful in exerting minimal military effort for a greater reward. In this sense, Russia tends to make cost-benefit calculations that favour military action (Pisciotta, 2023). This includes the “success” of the Crimea annexation despite some sanction costs. Russia is thus risk-acceptant, with its military interventions having territorial claims, the desire to strengthen its regional presence, and an economy that cannot support prolonged conflict. While China has a somewhat equally powerful military, it is more risk averse. Unlike Russia, the PRC has preferred a global approach, employing economic and diplomatic measures (Pisciotta, 2023). Being the world’s second-largest economy, it has the financial and economic backing to challenge American hegemony. By implementing a ‘good neighbourhood’ policy in the South China Sea and adopting the Westphalian view of non-intervention, it is largely committed to joint development through trading and investing. The Politburo also tends towards international stability and peace by challenging status quo powers through economic means rather than outright war. Its economic growth and maritime capabilities in the Asia-Pacific have, for example, aimed for a gradual removal of American regional presence. This marked difference between the states’ foreign strategy further widens Ukraine-Taiwan comparisons. By examining the policy strategies of the countries that lay claim to them and elucidating their disparities, it brings attention to the greater picture instead of simply focusing on the characteristic similarities

between both Ukraine and Taiwan. If Russia and China have different ideas on how they want to incorporate adjacent territories then it would be misguided to expect a similar result to Ukraine for Taiwan.

4. Limits to the Russia-China Parallel Concerning Taiwan

The discussion on parallels drawn between China and Russia can also be extended back to incorporate the topic of Taiwan. Indeed, while Russia had a limited base of supporting states previously to Ukraine, China’s allies are plenty. The economic and reputational consequences Russia faced would be comparatively less of an international burden for China in the Taiwan contingency. Over the past decade, China has deepened its ties with developing states in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, subsequently securing allies to back its unification policy (Taylor Fravel, 2023). Presumably, they would

not support the coalition against Beijing in the instance of an invasion of Taiwan, whereas Russia’s cultivation of allies in regions like Eastern and Central Europe have equivocated in their relations with Russia post Ukrainian invasion. China’s multiplicity of allies and international standing would transcend the reputational costs led on by the Taiwan contingency, costs that Russia had to bear post-Ukraine. This also does not account for the vast difference in capacities between both states, with Beijing’s higher military spending, greater economic power, and, relatively speaking, normalized long-term presence in the South China Sea region. The PRC also has a more supportive base of citizens, with most believing Taiwan is an inalienable part of China and that they have a legitimate right to it. Meanwhile, Russian citizens are less faithful to a Russia’s Ukraine. In this way, not only does China have a stronger and wider base of allies internationally that do not recognise Taiwan, but it also sees more support for its expansionist policies internally.

Who do you consider yourself to be first and foremost? – % chose the option “Citizen of Ukraine”

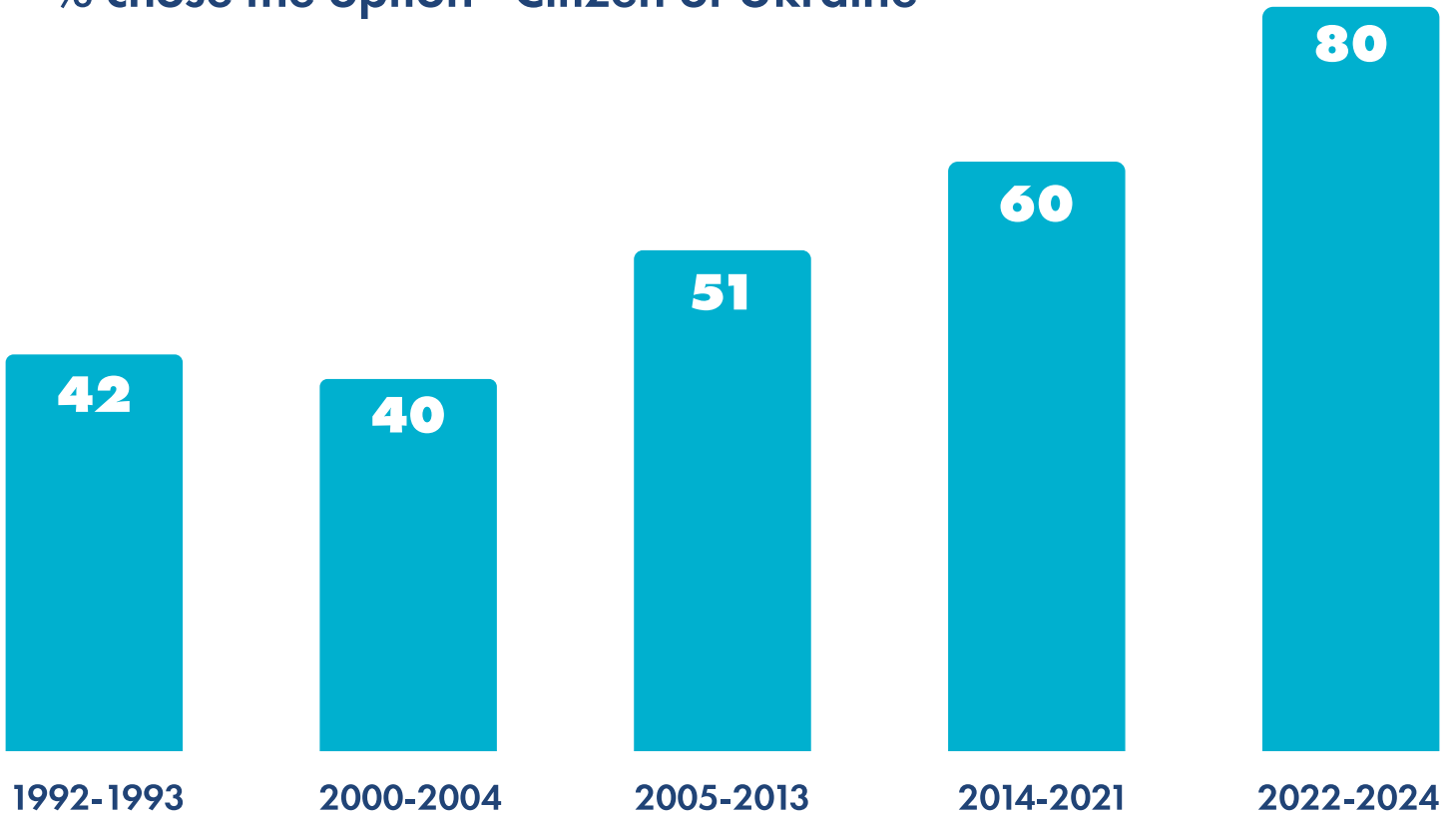
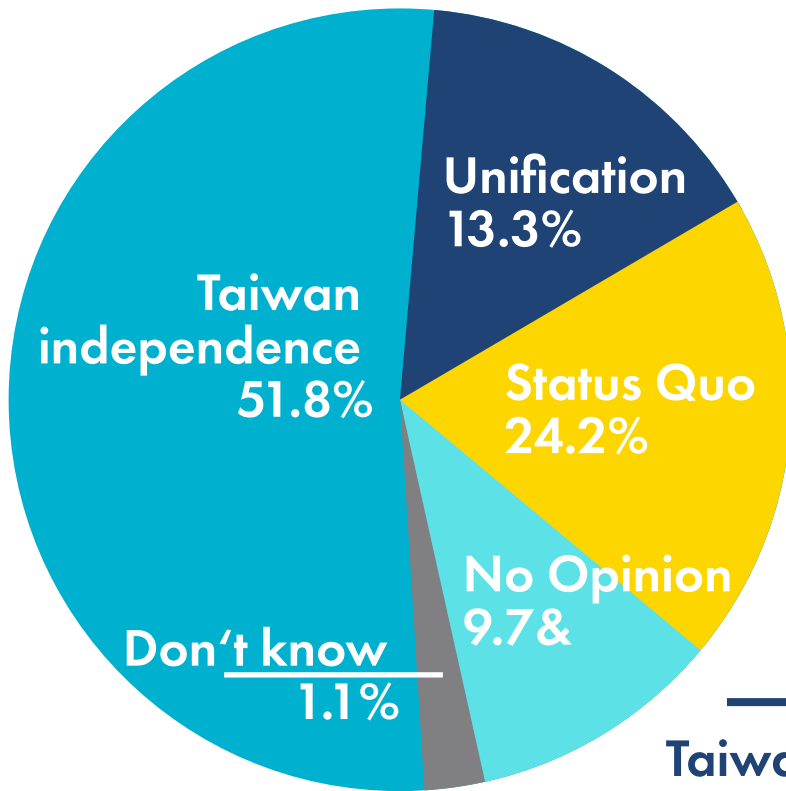


Figure 2: Graph 1 – The Kyiv International Institute of Sociology conducted long-term surveys on Ukrainian public opinion. After 2022, around 80% of Ukrainians consider themselves as “citizens of Ukraine”, as opposed to other options, including “citizen of Russia” and “citizen of the world” <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1458&t=13&page=1#:~:text=More%20noticeable%20differences%20relate%20to,%E2%80%93%20a%20total%20of%2061%25>.

Taiwanese public preferences on the political future of Taiwan

(December 2024, n=1,083)



Taiwan Public Opinion Foundation

Figure 2: Graph 2 – In a survey conducted by the Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation among Taiwanese adults 20 years or older, it was found that only 51.8% of respondents wish for full independence. <https://www.tpof.org/%E7%B2%BE%E9%81%B8%E6%96%87%E7%A0/taiwanese-preferences-on-taiwans-political-future%E5%B9%B4%E6%9C%8814%E6%97%A5%E5%BC%89/>

Furthermore, Russia unspokenly targeted the West through Ukraine, writing out an implicit message. Much less could be said for a potential Chinese attack on Taiwan. As it stands, Taiwan consists of a vital American limb in the Indo-Pacific and threatening it openly would lead to an anything but implicit message against NATO. Indeed, President Trump incited NATO countries to invest more in response to Ukraine, to move towards reinforcing European defence (Adler, 2024). However, Washington has gone further in its promise to Taiwan, offering direct military support and funds, and soliciting the help of NATO members in a potential campaign against Beijing (Lee, 2024). While Russia had few consequences post Crimea and largely economic backlash following Ukraine, the Taiwan contingency demands a greater military response from NATO. However, what the Taiwan contingency demands in response from NATO is different from what could realistically happen. China is stronger militarily than Russia, currently, and is a contender for global hegemony. While the US has been continually supportive of Taiwan, its support has always been contingent on maintaining formal diplomatic relations with Beijing. Even further, while the US might be willing to intervene in Tai-

wan, the same cannot be said for the rest of NATO countries. NATO intervention in case of a Chinese intervention is an American dream for many and is often interpreted as a simple ideal meant to reinforce American presence and legitimacy in the Asia-Pacific.

Lastly, but perhaps most crucially, raw military power is not how China envisages conquering Taiwan in the first place. There is still a pervasive belief amongst advocates of the parallel that China will lead a military intervention in Taiwan like Russia in Ukraine. However as mentioned, military action is a policy Russia favours compared to China's proclivity for economic expansion. More realistically, China has and is still working towards a "peaceful reunification" with Taiwan (Taylor Fravel, 2023). Policy experts have indeed been divided over this subject and their points of debate are twofold: whether China (a) plans to use force (b) in the near future. Chinese plans for reunification are for now purely political and manifest themselves in the continued isolation of Taiwan from international fora and multilateral institutions, the coercing of a unilateral economic dependence on China, and the restricted state recognition of Taiwan globally (Taylor Fravel, 2023). Much attention is allocated towards a blatantly

military Taiwan contingency, yet Chinese expansionism in Taiwan has perhaps already started. Xi has demonstrated a penchant for grey-zone statecraft in the South China Sea, which can be reasonably extended to Taiwan. If these methods were not already in motion, Ukraine's invasion would have reinforced deterrence from Taiwan and perhaps encouraged China to pursue alternative methods of statecraft. If anything, Taiwan will not implicate a military conflict, but a grey zone war of attrition, encompassing cyberspace, economic dependence, and diplomatic isolation. In this instance, Chinese expansion would manifest through the gradual isolation of Taiwan on the global scene. Further, if China continues to pursue grey-zone tactics with Taiwan and foregoes an outright military agenda, Western sanctioning, reaction, and defence would also be delayed. The NATO agenda concerning the Taiwan contingency projects a Chinese military intervention in Taiwan (Lee, 2024). US intelligence did not anticipate Putin's invasion of Ukraine and a similar outcome could be expected for One China (Yen, 2023). The Politburo's vision of a peaceful reunification with Taiwan is often overlooked, yet it corroborates China's current grey-zone activities in the South China Sea and its efforts so far to push Taiwan away from international fora and foreign recognition. Overall, regardless of potential military capabilities and allies comparisons between Ukraine and Taiwan, it is highly unlikely Beijing opts for a military intervention in Taiwan. This qualitative difference makes a likening of Taiwan to Ukraine an oversimplification that is misleading for the greater public. This discussion nonetheless reflects the concerns over China's growing power in the East as China concentrates, for now, on weakening US support of Taiwan in such a way that would allow for a

peaceful unification with Taiwan. As Beijing has disclosed it favours grey-zone tactics, so might continue its imposed dependency of Taiwan on China (Köckritz, 2023). In any case, the unprecedented resistance and the international coalition of support for Ukraine and lasting economic sanctions might dissuade Beijing from invading Taiwan so immediately if it were to be a military intervention.

5. Conclusion

Russia's claims to power in Ukraine has posited several, yet limited, considerations for China's aim towards Taiwan. Due to the similarities of their expansionist ambitions, Ukraine is thought to excavate a precedent for Chinese unification policy. Yet limits emerge from this parallel and

manifest themselves in the nature and quantity of the powers' allies, their economic and political capacities, and the statecraft methods

chosen by their expansionist policy. President Xi's readiness to maintain a strong global economic status for China also reduces the likelihood of a military intervention in Taiwan, instead favouring a gradual and informal war of attrition.

Most literature emphasises an ultimatum, the inevitability of war, but as demonstrated, this is not necessarily inexorable. Further work on this subject is essential, reflecting on President Trump's significant pro-NATO position and rapprochement with President Putin, and analysing China's penchant for grey zone tactics. While Russia pursues its destructive war of attrition on Ukraine, academic and media focus needs to move away from the black box of the Russia-China parallel and excavate Chinese expansionist ambitions without this oversimplification.

The similarities don't hold in terms of the mechanics of the Chinese and Russian expansionary powers.



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Jonatan von Moltke

Foresight Analysis for Policymaking in International Relations

Cutting-Edge Anticipatory Governance or
Crystal Ball Pseudo-Science?

About the Article

Can policymakers really anticipate the future? As uncertainty defines today's global politics, Jonatan von Moltke explores the rise of foresight analysis as a tool for strategic governance. He examines how methods like horizon scanning, scenario mapping, and megatrend analysis can help governments prepare for disruptive change—and weighs their promise against the risks of overconfidence, methodological limits, and political short-termism.

About the Author

Jonatan von Moltke has a BSc in Philosophy, Politics and Economics and an MA in International Affairs from the Hertie School. Academically, his focus lied on EU foreign policy, international law, and crisis management. Professionally, he has worked on stabilisation in conflict regions for the Stabilisation Platform and interned at the German Federal Foreign Office's Permanent Representation in New York. He also co-founded the futurEU Club on EU Affairs at the Hertie School, and wrote his MA thesis interviewing EU diplomats on CFSP majority voting. He aims to foster a sustainable, just, and peaceful multilateral future by contributing to evidence- and consultation-based policy.

1. Introduction

Foresight analysis as a tool of international relations scholarship has gained visibility and traction over the last decade (Sus & Hadeed, 2020). As a practicable method for scholars and policymakers, it can provide guidance and critical reflection on policy options and underlying assumptions. However, thinking in scenarios to anticipate the future is not new; it has been commonplace in the business world, where adopting “the long view” can be seen as a requirement for success (e.g. Schwartz, 1996). This trend coincides with, and can be seen to some extent as a response to, an ever-more volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, marked by heightened threats to the security of states their peoples and prompting institutions to think more strategically in identifying threats and potential pathways (see e.g. National Intelligence Council, 2021). At the same time, social sciences have been confronted with the need to study and comprehend these massive changes in the global ordering on the macro, meso and micro levels – and methodologies have had to adapt accordingly (Bernstein, 2000). From a policymaking view, this begs the question: What is the added value of foresight analysis methods to policymakers in the VUCA world?

2. Foresight Analysis: Options in Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity

It is important to recognize two things to refine the scope of foresight. Firstly, it is not equivalent to forecasting a sin-

gle trajectory, nor is it a “guessing game”. Secondly, there is no single correct way to go about foresight analysis, but several tools can lead to foresight. Generally speaking, foresight analysis is a strategic process to explore multiple plausible futures and prepare for uncertainty. This approach can be precious in international relations, where challenges are becoming more intertwined and where the simultaneous occurrence of geopolitical shifts, technological disruptions, and transnational crises demand anticipatory governance. In the face of imperfect information, amplified by information warfare and the increasing mis-

**Horizon scanning:
A systematic exploration of
emerging issues and weak signals.**



and disinformation threats, adapting to uncertainty is necessary, and foresight can contribute to such a

shift. A common puzzle in policymaking is how governments can prepare for crises that are by definition unpredictable. Consider the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic: while epidemiologists and EU foresight reports had flagged pandemics as a structural risk, institutions were still caught unprepared in early 2020. This example illustrates what foresight aims to address: not to predict a single future, but to expand the range of possibilities for which policymakers can prepare. As Van Woensel (2020) notes for the European Parliamentary Research Service, foresight acts as a “sense-making” device in contexts where policymakers face information overload and interpretative uncertainty. The perspective of comprehending today’s global politics as VUCA provides a useful framework to assess the specific value of foresight analysis. Indeed, each dimension creates challenges for international relations and can be mapped onto foresight contributions:

VUCA Dimension	Policy Change	Foresight contribution
Volatility	Sudden shocks, rapid change (e.g. energy crisis 2022)	Horizon scanning to detect weak signals, wild cards
Uncertainty	Limited knowledge of future developments	Scenario planning to build multiple plausible pathways
Complexity	Interdependence across systems (e.g. climate–security nexus)	Megatrends analysis to identify structural drivers
Ambiguity	Conflicting interpretations of the same signal (e.g. AI risks)	Serious games to test competing assumptions

3. Four Forms of Foresight Analysis in Practice

Foresight analysis can encompass a range of methods and procedural steps. Building on the broad overview of methods given earlier, this section engages more concretely with four prominent forms of foresight analysis. Following Störmer et al. (2019), it outlines the distinct methods of horizon scanning, scenario mapping, megatrends, and serious games, each with their own strengths and limitations and illustrative applications in international organizations or institutions.

Horizon Scanning

Firstly, if done right, horizon scanning identifies weak signals and can provide early warnings of potential disruptions. Its starting point is acknowledging the possibility of wildcard development. For example, the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre conducts horizon scans to anticipate changes affecting EU policy (European Commission, 2024). Horizon scanning is a systematic exploration of emerging issues and weak signals. It seeks to identify potential “wild cards” before they become pressing crises. A strength of this method is its breadth: it casts a wide net across domains, often using expert panels, literature reviews, and digital tools. However, its drawback lies in interpretation – distinguishing meaningful signals from background noise requires institutional expertise and continuity (OECD, 2020). For instance, the UK’s Ho-

Figure 1: Mapping VUCA dimensions to foresight contributions

zizon Scanning Programme (established in the Cabinet Office in the 2010s) provided structured inputs into national security strategies, influencing how risks like cyber threats and pandemics were integrated into planning. In the EU, the Joint Research Centre’s horizon scans (European Commission, 2024) aim to detect developments such as disruptive biotechnologies or new patterns of resource scarcity that could affect Union policies.

Scenario Mapping

Scenario mapping constructs multiple plausible future narratives by combining key uncertainties and trends. Unlike forecasts, scenarios deliberately diverge to explore a range of outcomes. Their main advantage is to stimulate strategic reflection and stress-test existing policies (Barma et al., 2016). The challenge is resource intensity: high-quality scenario exercises require expertise, workshops, and iteration. The US National Intelligence Council’s Global Trends reports (NIC, 2021) are among the most visible applications of scenario analysis in IR. They provide four to five distinct futures every four years, structured around major drivers such as demography, technology, and governance. These scenarios do not claim predictive accuracy but serve as inputs for long-term strategic planning across the US security establishment. Scenario mapping

deep dives and visualizes the interconnections between drivers of change and can reveal previously concealed patterns (Kjaer, 2014). It begins by identifying assumptions around the development of a particular region or policy field subject to change. Next, it creates distinct, plausible future narratives depending on the development of key identified variables. This can enable policymakers to proof-test strategies and create “policy-relevant research programs” (Barma et al., 2016) to increase preparedness, as previous examples such as the New Era Foreign Policy Conference have shown (ibid).

Megatrends

Megatrends are long-term structural drivers of change, such as climate change, digitalisation, demographic shifts, or shifting geopolitical power balances. The strength of megatrend analysis is its ability to contextualize short-term developments within enduring dynamics. Yet megatrends risk becoming too abstract or deterministic if not linked to policy decisions (Störmer et al., 2019). To identify megatrends, the Delphi method engages diverse experts through iterative surveys on a specific topic to build an understanding of the state of consensus and critical uncertainties among experts, which can inform decision-making on complex or “wicked problems” with unavoidable dilemmas (Peters, 2017). The OECD, for instance, has systematised megatrend analysis across governments, providing a toolkit (OECD, 2020) that helps ministries integrate long-term drivers into budgetary and regulatory planning. Within the EU, the annual Strategic Foresight Reports (since 2020) organize analysis explicitly around megatrends, such as the “twin green and digital transitions” (European Commission, 2022). These reports aim

For international relations, foresight matters because global challenges are increasingly interconnected: pandemics overlap with geopolitical rivalries, climate change amplifies security dilemmas.

to embed forward-looking considerations into the Better Regulation agenda.

Serious Games

Serious games include wargames and simulations and allow decision-makers to role-play alternative scenarios, revealing assumptions and decision logics under stress. Their key strength is experiential learning: by immersing policymakers in a simulated environment, they surface biases and encourage adaptive thinking. This kind of foresight has of course existed for centuries, as anticipating

potential movements in war has always involved foresight under certain assumptions. Unsurprisingly, NATO has used cyber conflict simulations to train officials in crisis response, enabling

them to explore escalation dynamics in hybrid warfare scenarios. Similarly, climate policy games have been deployed in EU research projects to test stakeholder responses to carbon pricing or adaptation policies (Matti, 2025). These cases show how games can transform abstract foresight into embodied practice. However, full-on simulation games as played nowadays are costly, time-intensive, and dependent on participant buy-in (Fuerth & Faber, 2012).

4. Recommendation: Matching Methods to Policy Situations

The diversity of foresight methods suggests that their value depends on context. Rather than seeking a single “best” method, policymakers should view foresight as a toolkit. Table 2 summarizes which approaches may be most appropriate under different policy situations.

Policy situation	Suitable foresight tool(s)	Rationale
Early warning of emerging risks	Horizon scanning	Broad signal detection of volatility and weak signals
Long-term strategic planning	Megatrend analysis; Scenario mapping	Linking structural drivers to alternative futures
Crisis preparedness, Stress-testing	Scenario mapping; Serious games	Explore plausible crisis dynamics, test resilience of policies
Stakeholder engagement	Serious games; Scenario mapping	Involve diverse actors, reveal biases, generate shared understanding
Policy mainstreaming	Megatrends; Horizon scanning	Embed foresight into regulatory and budgetary frameworks

Figure 2: Matching foresight methods to policy situations

The benefits of using the array of foresight analysis methods can be very substantial for policymakers. In times of uncertainty and constraints on the availability of resources (time, financial, information and attention resources), foresight analysis can first encourage systemic thinking and prepare policymakers for various pathways. Be it related to exogenous shocks like COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, or incremental factors of change, preparing for the future with foresight analysis through different scenarios can highlight interdependencies between factors and foster a more comprehensive understanding of potential outcomes. Foresight can thus help comprehend potential future pathways and reduce what has been called “strategic surprise” in risk management studies (Bracken, 2008). Indeed, where risks become less predictable, it can become crucial to envision and model alternative scenarios based on the assumptions of trends in key variables. In this vein, it can also promote adaptive decision-making, rather than reactive decision-making, allowing policymakers to act flexibly when uncertainties unfold. This applies in particular in the international sphere, where states are dependent on decisions and actions of others and are less able to mitigate potential risks to the own foreign po-

licy actions. Lastly, foresight analysis can help overcome cognitive biases by engaging with diverse perspectives and coherently thinking through potential outcomes, even if they are deemed unlikely. Taking on a creative and out-of-the-box perspective, as is possible in foresight analysis, can greatly enhance the ability of policymakers to contribute to improve decision-making. This can reduce an overreliance on past experiences and create a more forward-looking approach to foreign policymaking. Despite its growing prominence, foresight analysis faces several substantive criticisms. Firstly, it has come under scrutiny and criticism due to the lack of falsifiability, among others. In the paradigm of scientific inquiry coined by Karl Popper, only falsifiable hypotheses can be regarded as scientifically sound. First, as scenarios cannot be empirically tested or disproven, its lack of falsifiability challenges its scientific legitimacy. Second, foresight is often only loosely integrated into policymaking, and foresight recommendations end up being “more easily said than done”, with institutional barriers and organizational silos limiting its practical impact. Overpromising the benefits of foresight can lead to disappointment, especially when exercises do not translate into concrete policy action.

Methodologically, foresight can be resource-intensive and subject to bias, relying heavily on expert judgment. Finally, the dominance of short-termism in policy cycles often undermines the long-term, systemic perspective that foresight seeks to promote. Nonetheless, strategic foresight methods have been assessed as adding significant value both to social sciences and to policymakers; albeit not being falsifiable, they meet other relevant factors of scientific inquiry and have the ability to broaden the scope of what is thought to be possible and likely (Sus & Hadeed, 2020). However, it is not up for discussion that foresight analysis cannot replace political decision-making, but rather how it can inform it and improve systemic resilience (Burrows & Gnad, 2018). What is more, policymakers are not expected to implement only what constitutes scientific consensus. Instead, they should be guided by scientific expertise but consider various other factors such as societal and economic acceptability of policy measures. This may warrant a more central role of foresight methods in policymaking than in political science journals. The more relevant question regards its complexity and time requirements for policymakers; it is highly contingent on contexts and systemic factors whether policymakers have the adequate resources and methodological understanding of foresight analysis in order to step out of “everyday processes”, to have the courage within the organizational normative environment to devote resources to foresight analysis and thereby think more strategically ahead. Indeed, for strategic nodes in the policymaking systems, such as in-house think tanks or policy guidance units, foresight analysis can significantly add value to foster resilience and preparedness in a VUCA world.

5. Conclusion

A recent illustrative example of foresight analysis in practice is NATO’s Strategic Foresight Analysis (SFA23) (NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2023). The SFA23 process was a collaborative and methodologically rigorous foresight process, engaging over 800 experts from NATO member states, partner nations, academia, industry, and international organizations through 10 intensive work-

shops. The analysis employed a suite of foresight tools: horizon scanning was used to identify weak signals and emerging disruptions, megatrends analysis contextualized these within broader, long-term drivers such as climate change and technological innovation, and scenario planning developed multiple plausible “Four Worlds” futures to stress-test NATO’s assumptions and explore the implications for the Alliance’s security environment. Rather than simply describing possible futures, SFA23 focused on identifying risks and “strategic shocks” that could disrupt NATO’s mission, ensuring that the insights generated would be directly relevant for policy and planning. The results of SFA23 have had a tangible impact on NATO’s policies and capacities. Its findings now underpin the NATO Defence Planning Process, shaping capability priorities and national defense plans across the Alliance. Foresight analysis is not crystal-ball prediction but structured imagination. By addressing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, it enhances policymakers’ ability to prepare for disruptive futures. The examples of horizon scanning, scenario mapping, megatrends, and serious games demonstrate both the diversity of tools available and their complementarity. For international relations, foresight matters because global challenges are increasingly interconnected: pandemics overlap with geopolitical rivalries, climate change amplifies security dilemmas, and AI reshapes economic and political orders. In this context, foresight enables more adaptive decision-making, helps overcome cognitive biases, and builds systemic resilience. Still, foresight’s impact depends on institutional uptake. As the European Commission’s recent efforts illustrate, foresight reports and megatrend analyses must be embedded into policy cycles rather than remaining on the margins. International organizations, from the OECD to NATO and the UNDP, have demonstrated that foresight can guide crisis preparedness and long-term strategy — but only if decision-makers are willing to engage with it. The policy lesson is therefore not to treat foresight as optional or decorative but as an integral component of strategic governance in a VUCA world, albeit without ignoring its drawbacks.

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Marie Klostermeier

China 2049 vs. India 2047

A Comparison of the Great Power
Plans for the Mid-21st Century

About the Article

What are the great power plans for the mid-21st century—and how do they differ? China and India are charting rival paths toward global influence through their initiatives. Marie Klostermeier examines how both nations' economic, military, and institutional strategies reflect distinct historical experiences and ambitions. While China's vision centres on reclaiming dominance through state-led transformation and global assertiveness, India's rests on inclusive growth and multi-alignment. Their contrasting routes reveal two competing models of power and legitimacy in a multipolar world.

About the Author

Marie Klostermeier is pursuing a B.A. in Governance and Public Policy with a focus on International and Comparative Governance. Drawing on academic experiences in China and Mexico, her research centers on regional and international organizations as well as processes of autocratization.

1. Introduction

China and India, the two most populous nations in the world (World Population Review, 2025), both aspire not only to transform themselves fundamentally but also, each in its own way, to reshape the global order in line with long-term strategies. In their mid-century goals, both governments not only express how they want to shape their domestic realities but also declare how they wish their nations to be perceived on the world stage and, more importantly, how they themselves envisage the world order of tomorrow. However, while both countries share the determination to redefine their role in global affairs, their respective visions diverge significantly. China and India are united only in their intent to exercise greater influence over the future of the international system. The competition is therefore not limited to domestic development or regional power, but about a rivalry of ideas and whose vision of the future will ultimately prevail. This article will analyse these two distinct visions in terms of their general vision, the economic strategy, the military strategy and the institutional strategy. This comparison will highlight both parallels and contrasts in their long-term perspectives. Therefore the article seeks to answer: What are the plans of the great powers and how do they differ? Both countries are marking their mid-century goals on deeply symbolic anniversaries. For the Chinese future vision, Xi Jinping guides the country and the world towards the “Two Centenaries” goals. The first being concluded in 2021 by the 100th anniversary of the CCP, the second to be achieved by the year 2049, the centenary of the People’s Republic. China’s centenary goal of 2049 is framed to be deeply rooted in its historical narrative of overcoming the so-called „Century of Humiliation.“ This period began with the Opium Wars in the 1830s and was marked by territorial concessions and foreign invasions, which have shaped China’s national consciousness until today (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). According to the government’s narrative, this period ends with the establishment of the People’s Republic of China and the Communist Party’s takeover in 1949. This developmental milestone is therefore also used for the Chinese mission

to reclaim great-power status. By contrast, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has advanced the “Viksit Bharat 2047” vision, or “Developed India,” aligning the country’s long-term ambitions with the centenary of its independence from colonial rule in 1947. India’s centenary goals are presented as the completion of an unfinished national project of development. The initiative reflects an aspiration to transcend the legacies of colonial underdevelopment, poverty, and inequality by positioning India among the world’s leading economies.

Therefore, both countries want to make up for a historically missed opportunity and lead the country to new greatness by catching up. While both narratives are based on real historical facts, in both cases history is deliberately used to build national motivation for their visions by building on this national pride. So, by building on a historic motivation for the mid-century visions, they serve as both a response to historical trauma and a legitimizing narrative for present-day governance.

2. General Vision

China’s first centenary goal was to build a “moderately prosperous society in all respects” (The State Council the People’s Republic of China, 2021) and was officially declared as fulfilled by Xi. Now, the nation is aiming for a „great modern socialist country in every dimension“ (Xi, 2017) until 2049. As an interim goal, Xi set the year 2035 as a milestone. By then, China is to become a global leader in technological innovation, develop a significantly larger middle-income group, and establish a modern governance system with stronger institutions and greater capacity. In the final stage until mid-century, Xi emphasizes common prosperity for the Chinese people. In concrete terms, this includes growing the middle-income group from 400 million people to about 800 million by 2035 (Global Times, 2021). In his report on the current five-year plan, he added more concrete goals for 2035: a “new industrialization” with per capita GDP reaching the level of a mid-level developed country, while carbon emissions

are to decline after peaking. It is suggested that China's GDP could exceed 160 trillion yuan (USD 25 trillion) within the next decade (Global Times, 2021). China's vision for 2049 is characterized by individual plans and sub-targets, focusing on domestic development while it claims to shape international norms. India's centenary vision on the other hand is defined by clear focus areas. One of the most emphasized areas is economic development and growth, driven by fostering innovation and technology. This is closely tied to visions of social progress and inclusivity, especially in the fields of education and healthcare. The roadmap also includes enhancing India's infrastructure and modernizing transportation systems (Viksit Bharat 2047, 2025). While India officially aims to achieve net-zero carbon emissions not until 2070 (Mohapatra & Pohit, 2024), environmental sustainability is still a central pillar of the program, emphasizing renewable energy and reduced dependence on fossil fuels. This reflects the tension between India's developmental needs and its climate commitment. Besides these national goals, the initiative also focuses on security policy and India's role in the world. Thus, it not only plans to modernize the armed forces and pursue military modernization, but also to strengthen multilateral diplomacy and to actively engage in global forums by presenting itself as "the voice of the Global South." Overall, these visions differ primarily in terms of their ideological components. China bases its claims on the overarching goal of securing socialist rule. In India, this narrative is less ideologically bound, but more nationalistic in terms of the pillars of development.

Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB): A multilateral financial institution and development bank initiated by China.



3. Economic Strategy

China's economic strategy for the long-term development of the country focuses primarily on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, alongside broader efforts in technological self-reliance. While the BRI began with investments in Kazakhstan and Indonesia, China now established this influence in over 150 countries (Johns-

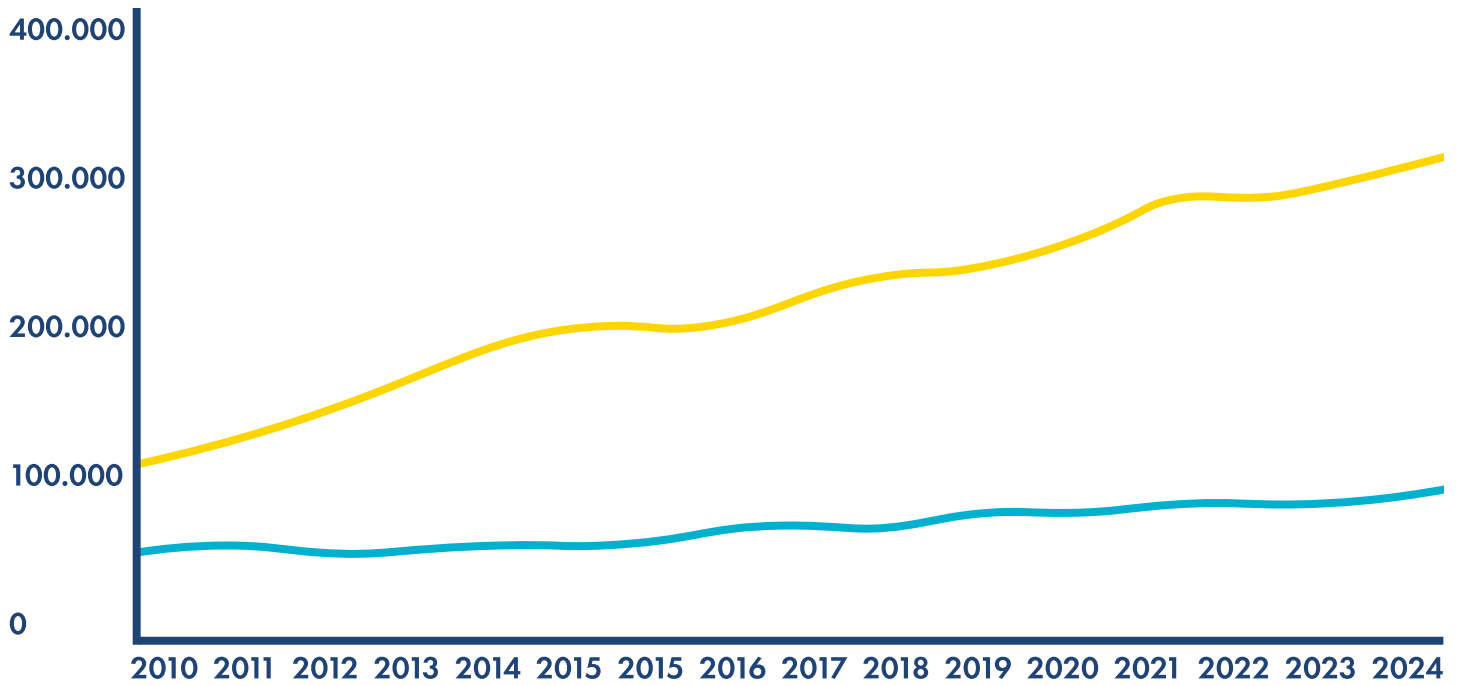
ton, 2018; Wang, 2025). The initiative is intended not only to foster global connectivity but also to strengthen China's financial sector and internationalize the Renminbi. Cumulative the initiative has reached USD 1.3 trillion, with Africa and Central Asia being most engaged in the initiative (Wang, 2025). In the first half of 2025 the investment volume set a new record with USD 66.2 billion in construction contracts and USD 58.1 billion in direct investments, increasing China's influence over its partners. While engagement in green energy reached new records with an investment of USD 9.7 billion, oil and gas engagement rose to USD 30 billion. Xi calls this "a more proactive strategy of opening up" (Xi, 2022, p. 8) and claims the Belt and Road Initiative being welcomed by the international community (Xi, 2022). In contrast, India's economic focus for the mid-century goals emphasizes domestic innovation promotion, aiming to rank among the world's top three economic powers by 2047. The target is

to transform India's current US \$4 trillion economy into a projected US \$30 trillion powerhouse by the independence anniversary, building especially on the tech, pharmaceutical, and manufacturing sectors (Viksit Bharat 2047, 2025). India's share of global GDP has more than tripled since the early 1990s, now around 3.5% in nominal terms, making it the world's fifth-largest economy. The Viksit Bharat vision seeks not only to achieve economic growth but also to push Indian companies in various sectors to become global leaders in strategic sectors (Mohapatra & Pohit, 2024). The ambition is to root India's exports more deeply into global supply chains and foster greater self-reliance and reduce dependence on foreign suppliers. Innovation is a core pillar for this massive growth goal. India's startup ecosystem has grown to become the third largest in the world, with more than 100 unicorns across various sectors. The country climbed in the Global Innovation Index from 81st to 40th place (Chhabra, 2024). This rise is supported not only by private investment but also by extensive government support in research and development. To achieve this, the outline aims

for an annual average GDP-growth rate of 8-10% (Viksit Bharat 2047, 2025). With the annual growth rate ranging from 6.5% to 9.7% since 2021 (World Bank Group, 2025), when the program was launched, this vision might not be so far away. Yet challenges like risk of falling in the middle-income-trap and regional disparities remain. The comparison of the countries highlights different strategic

logics. China projects power outward through massive infrastructure and financial investments, while India pursues a growth model rooted in domestic diversification. Both approaches aim to secure global influence by mid-century, but their effectiveness will depend on how well global markets react to this in the future.

Military Strategy – Expenditure by country in Million US\$



4. Military Strategy

China’s military strategy is characterized by rapid military buildup, a strong emphasis on maritime power, and the overarching objective of “resolving” the Taiwan question by 2049 (Stahl, 2022). While Beijing officially claims to work “together with Asia-Pacific countries to uphold regional peace and development” (The State Council, People’s Republic of China, 2025), developments in the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea suggest a more assertive trajectory (Cordesman, 2017). In the master plan for 2049, centenary goals for the military include accelerating modernization and enhance combat readiness (Chul, 2025). Between 2010 and 2024 China’s defence budget more than tripled (Figure 1). Xi set the goal to “further consolidate national security”, by fulfilling “the goals for the centenary of the People’s Liberation Army in 2027” to make a progress in “building a Peaceful China” (Xi, 2022). US intelligence estimates say Xi has ordered

Figure 1: Military expenditure by country, China and India Comparison, in current US\$ M Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, 2025

the PLA to have military readiness to invade Taiwan by 2027, if necessary (London, 2025). Besides Taiwan, China’s 2025 National Security White Paper outlines a holistic approach to security. This concept broadens the definition of threats to include cyberspace, artificial intelligence, biosecurity, and public health. The document underlines the CCP’s absolute leadership as the guiding principle and presents China as a stable power in the Asia-Pacific (Koshy, 2025). While the focus on party control and rapid military expansion might increase regional insecurity and undermines trust in China’s peaceful intentions. The Indian strategy for the mid-century also contains important strategic goals in the security sector. It aims to combine a strong international role in military exports and strategic autonomy with capacity-building to secure regional influence and balance China (Choudhury, 2022). Strategic security measures rooted in the Viksit Bharat vision have

been taken, for example, through the “Agnipath scheme,” a highly controversial recruiting initiative for lower-ranked soldiers (Tiwari, 2025). On top of that, India also aims to reduce its reliance on foreign suppliers while building up its own defence industry. India ranks second in the share of global arm imports, only outranked by Ukraine. The country still receives its most weapons from Russia (38% of Russian arm exports go to India). It has diversified towards Western suppliers, particularly France, Israel, and the USA. But over the last decade, overall arms imports have declined as India has expanded domestic production capacity (George et al., 2024). A central element of this strategy is the transformation from a net importer to a net exporter of weapons. The Defence Export Promotion Policy set a target of ₹350 billion (≈ \$3.98 billion) in exports by 2025, though actual exports reached only ₹236.22 billion (≈ \$2.68 billion), falling short by over 30% (The Economic Times, 2025). Still, defence exports reached an all-time high, underlining progress. The Viksit Bharat vision expects the Indian defence industry to be largely self-reliant by 2047, supported by programs like iDEX (Innovations for Defence Excellence), which promotes startups and innovation in the defence sector (Dubey, 2025). In comparison, China’s military vision relies on regional dominance for global influence, while India’s focus seems to be more focused on strategic balance through autonomy. So, while China’s trajectory raises concerns about regional escalation, India’s challenge lies in turning ambitious targets into reality. Strategically, China positions itself as a challenger to the existing order, whereas India up to this point benefits more from shaping and navigating from within, by strengthening its own role. The contrast highlights two divergent approaches both being rooted in coercive capability-building.

Both visions showcase alternative models of rising power behaviour.



5. Institutional Strategy

China and India pursue different visions in the future of multilateralism and their role in international institutions, because of distinct strategic priorities. China has shifted

its focus toward building an alternative multilateral architecture, most prominently through the expansion of BRICS+, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). These initiatives are designed to diversify authority in global governance and increase China’s influence in non-Western institutions (Patrick & Hogan, 2025). The AIIB, in particular, serves as a tool to support the Belt and Road Initiative while countering Western dominance in development finance (Qian et al., 2023). It aims to expand the areas of influence of these institutions both geographically and politically. BRICS has broadened its agenda beyond trade and has begun discussing security-related issues such as terrorism and institutional reform. However, action remains limited due to divergent national interests and the alliance’s constrained mandate (Makhija, 2025). China’s “Global Security Initiative” first proposed in 2023 also advocates for multilateralism by presenting itself as a uniter by including an alternative to western coercion. The initiative also reaffirms China’s support for the UN as a central platform for global security governance and explicitly opposes “Cold War mentality” and “bloc confrontation”. The paper is an active call on upholding “the international system with the UN at its core (...) and uphold the authority of the UN and its status as the main platform for global security governance.” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People’s Republic of China, 2023). Critically, this dual approach illustrates China’s strategy of engaging with existing institutions while simultaneously building parallel structures to expand its normative and political influence (Ekman, 2025). China is also to enhance soft power through culture, sports and education and, within the next five years, increase its role in global governance (Xi, 2021). Modi seeks to position India as a leading voice of the Global South. This includes contributing to various global and regional forums such as the G20, BRICS, Quad, and SCO to shape its global agenda. It also plays an important role in the UN as one of the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping operations (Singh & Chhering, 2024). Strategically, India stresses

autonomy in its foreign policy, building partnerships with both the West and other developing nations, while avoiding over-reliance on any single side (Viksit Bharat 2047, 2025). This echoes the historical doctrine of non-alignment but is reframed in the twenty-first century as “multi-alignment,” where India acts as a balancing power. The Viksit Bharat vision also involves bilateral and multilateral partnerships and active engagement in global forums. Besides that, the vision seeks to make India a key player in global trade by expanding its exports (Viksit Bharat 2047, 2025). India complements these efforts with soft-power initiatives, including diaspora diplomacy, vaccine and technical cooperation, cultural outreach through Yoga, and the promotion of democratic governance as part of its claim to represent developing nations (Modi, 2025). While China wants to strengthen its role in the UN due

to its position of power, India wants to expand its own position of power in this forum by establishing itself as the spokesperson for the global south. Both countries also build on regional organizations in which they participate together, with China placing greater emphasis on expanding the policy areas of these organizations. This strategy reflects the attempt of selective multilateralism from within and beyond existing frameworks through formal participation in established institutions while gradually building a parallel order centered on its own developmental and security narratives. India pursues a multi-alignment policy approach by seeking to amplify its voice in global forums. Participation in both Western-dominated and alternative multilateral activities reflects the country’s pragmatic flexibility in order to ensure its strategic autonomy.



Figure 2. Visualization of the Goals as presented in the text

6. Conclusion

China's 2049 vision and India's 2047 vision represent two ambitious and contrasting national projects with international implications. Both are strongly rooted in the histories of their countries, and they seek to secure central roles in shaping the future of the world. China's outlook is framed as a national rebirth, seeking to reclaim a central and dominant role through political, institutional, economic, and military power. India, in contrast, seeks to realize its full potential since independence and to secure a stronger voice as a rising global power, shaped by the legacy of colonial subjugation and post-independence development challenges. These distinct historic starting points have shaped different strategic approaches. Therefore, the comparison of the nations' long-term visions reveals how both countries approach power and legitimacy differently. China's military buildup and open communication about wanting to "resolve" the Taiwan issue by 2049 showcase its global power claim in a multipolar order. India openly works on having a say in this multipolar order as well, as ambitious and precise growth

goals in the economic and military sphere show. In many respects, however, the strategies of the respective countries are not mutually exclusive. For example, the domestic economic development goals of the two countries do not appear to interfere with each other. When it comes to international investment and thus the question of influence in the region and in the Global South, however, the countries may find themselves at odds. India's strategy of multi-alignment seems to be an appropriate response to a fragile world order, while China's construction of an alternative order entails more risks. The comparison on the timeline shows, that both countries envisioned their initiatives in specific intermediate goals. While these goals oftentimes differ, it points out a similar time horizon. Both visions showcase alternative models of rising power behaviour. Consequently, the competition between these visions of the twenty-first century and their fulfilment will not only impact these nations and their relationship with each other but also significantly influence the future strategies of the rest of the multipolar world.

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An interview by
Leonie Nienhaus
Ferdinand Wegener

Security, Society and Sustainability

A Conversation on
 Ukraine and beyond with
Viola von Cramon-Taubadel



About the Interview

The interview discussed, among other topics, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the Green Party's position on delivering weapons to Ukraine, EU enlargement, Georgia's turn toward autocracy, Russian disinformation, and the importance of a strong and collective European response

About the Interviewee

Viola von Cramon-Taubadel is a German politician with Alliance 90/The Greens and a former Member of the European Parliament (2019–2024). In the European Parliament, she served on the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and as Vice-Chair of the EU–Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee, playing a key role in shaping the EU's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. A former Member of the German Bundestag (2009–2013), she has long been engaged in Eastern European affairs and EU enlargement policy, particularly concerning Ukraine, Georgia, and the Western Balkans.

About the Interviewers

Leonie Nienhaus is pursuing an Erasmus Mundus Joint M.A. in European Politics and Society at Charles University (CZ) and Jagiellonian University (PL). Her research focuses on Central and Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, and Central Asia. Currently, she participates in the Young European Ambassador program and serves as the vice-coordinator of the EU-Moldova Dialogue Initiative.

Ferdinand Wegener is the Co-Founder of EPIS and the current Head of Delegations. He studied law at the University of Cologne with a focus on European & International Law. He has led EPIS delegations to the Black Sea Security Forum in Odesa, the Paris Defence & Strategy Forum and the Munich Security Conference. His main topics of research are security policy and defense technology, with a specific interest in military aviation.



Figure 1: Viola von Cramon-Taubadel

1. Introduction

Viola von Cramon-Taubadel is a German politician of Alliance 90/The Greens. She was a member of the German Bundestag from 2009 to 2013 and of the European Parliament from 2019 to 2024. During her time in the European Parliament, she served on several key bodies, including the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET). In addition, she was active in the EU-Russia Parliamentary Cooperation Delegation Committee (D-RU) and served as Vice-Chair of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (D-UA). During her studies, she was already involved in international projects in Estonia, Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Russia and China. Alliance 90/The Greens (German: Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) is a green political party in Germany that emerged from the New Social Movements in 1980, which protested against environmental destruction, nuclear energy, and rearmament. Traditionally known for its pacifist stance, the party has since become one of the strongest advocates for military

support to Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.

2. Questions:

1. What initially inspired you to enter politics, and how have your motivations evolved over time?

I think I have always been a political person. I always cared deeply about particular issues and believed that individuals have the power to make a difference. As a student, I was active in the faculty council, and I also founded an NGO that worked with students from rural areas in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. We organised internships for them on German farms and supported their learning experiences. But once I had children, it became more difficult to travel to Eastern Europe, so I shifted my focus to local politics in my own community.



Figure 2: Viola von Cramon-Taubadel with Ferdinand Wegener and Leonie Nienhaus at the Black Sea Security Conference, May 2025, Odesa, Ukraine.

I realised that it is often much more effective to get involved through a political party than to act alone. There were practical issues I wanted to help address, such as nursery opening hours and local services. I also discovered how fulfilling political work can be. There is real satisfaction in shaping decisions, working with people and helping to bring about meaningful change. That sense of purpose motivated me to get involved at the state level, where I served as a party spokesperson on agriculture, European affairs, and international policy. In 2009, I decided to run for the Bundestag. Of course, working at the national level is very different from local politics, but the principles are the same: staying connected to people, listening to their concerns, standing by your values and advocating for issues that serve the wider public interest rather than narrow groups. My academic background also influenced my path. I studied agriculture in the 1990s,

I think you simply cannot be a well-informed MP or MEP without the input of experts, think tanks, universities and institutions like yours.

and when Renate Künast became Minister for Consumer Protection and Agriculture in 2001, that was a major inspiration. It probably marked the final turning point that led me to formally join the party and run for local office.

2. What kind of impact have you noticed from your interactions with young adults and civil society, particularly through initiatives like school visits and engagement with NGOs and Think Tanks?

I think you simply cannot be a well-informed MP or MEP without the input of experts, think tanks, universities and institutions like yours. People often talk about lobbyists in a narrow or negative way, but I believe we need a much broader understanding. Civil society, independent researchers and human rights groups also represent interests and values, and their contributions are vital.



Figure 3: EPIS Thinktank delegation met Viola as part of the visit to the Black Sea Security Forum in Odesa, Ukraine, 2025

As for school visits, they were always a bit limited by my travel schedule to Strasbourg and Brussels. Usually, I could only visit on Fridays or early on Mondays, but I still managed quite a few, and not just during campaigns.

I strongly believe in the importance of engaging the next generation. They are the ones who will shape the future, so it is crucial that they understand how politics works and why it matters.



Figure 4: The Black Sea Security Forum took place at the historic Odesa Opera House, chosen because the venue of last year's conference was hit by a Russian airstrike, Ukraine, 2025, photo by Ferdinand Wegener

For me, the goal is to bring young people into a lasting space of engagement. Whether that means joining a party, founding their own initiative, or connecting with others across Europe, I think we need to support and encourage that energy. From what I have seen, there is actually a fairly large number of students who are already on a path to become engaged in politics and civil society. That gives me hope.

3. What are your thoughts on the current state and future prospects of EU enlargement?

When I joined the European Parliament in 2019, there was a strong sense of frustration around the topic of enlargement. It was something people talked about, but mostly in theory. On paper, yes, the EU supported enlargement, but in practice, not much was moving.



Figure 5: House of Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2025, Photo by Ferdinand Wegener

When I travelled to the Western Balkans, and also to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, and spoke with people about the EU's approach, they were clearly sceptical. They had heard these promises for years. In the Western Balkans, they've been told since the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 that membership was on the horizon. But progress has been painfully slow. North Macedonia, for example, went through the entire Prespa Process to resolve its name issue, and yet, once they completed that, another hurdle appeared. The frustration is understandable. It feels like every time one obstacle is resolved, another takes its place. I have always said that we must take a broader view. Yes, there are geopolitical reasons to

support enlargement, but more fundamentally, there will be no lasting peace or stability in the EU without peace and stability in the Western Balkans. These countries are surrounded by EU member states. It's in our own interest to support them. There are also environmental reasons. For instance, the 19 remaining coal power plants in the Western Balkans emit more sulphur dioxide than the 250+ coal plants across the entire EU. If we are serious about our climate goals, we need to integrate these regions into the European Green Deal as soon as possible. We are talking about around 17 million people altogether, about the same as the population of North Rhine-Westphalia. Two of these countries, Albania and

The 19 remaining coal power plants in the Western Balkans emit more sulphur dioxide than the 250+ coal plants across the entire EU.

Montenegro, are already NATO members. Montenegro has fewer people than cities like Leipzig or Stuttgart. No one can reasonably argue that the EU is incapable of integrating countries of that size. I believe it's essential that we go beyond technical preparation and start the political process in earnest. That includes strategic communication within EU member states, especially in countries like France, where public support is key and a referendum might be required. We cannot afford to let countries that have fulfilled all the necessary conditions sit waiting indefinitely. In that sense, as tragic as the war in Ukraine is, it has also been a wake-up call. Even the most hesitant political leaders and commissioners in Brussels now understand the gravity of the situation. Russia's aggression has shown why a more united and resilient EU is urgently needed, and that includes bringing in new members who share our values.

Figure 6: Day 311 of peaceful protests in Georgia, 4th of October, 2025, Tbilisi, Georgia, Photo by Leonie Nienhaus



The introduction of the so-called "foreign agent" law is a major concern. It threatens to cut off funding for civil society organisations and brand them as agents of foreign influence. People are being arrested, and the fear of repression is growing. It's starting to resemble the situation in Belarus more than a country on a path toward EU membership. While in the European Parliament,

4. Throughout your career, you have actively engaged with the South Caucasus, particularly Georgia and Armenia. Given Georgia's Democratic backsliding under the Georgian Dream party and Armenia's recent pivot toward the EU, what do you see as the future of relations between the EU and these two countries?

Georgia was long considered a frontrunner in democratic reforms and Western alignment. It even enshrined its aspirations for EU and NATO membership in the constitution so in theory, the current government is committed to that path. But in practice, we are seeing serious democratic backsliding. On the other hand, civil society in Georgia is remarkably active and resilient. Since the disputed elections last year, we have seen mass protests across the country, not just students, but people from all sectors of society. And yet, both the European Union and the United States have remained largely silent. That lack of response has been disheartening for many on the ground.

I strongly advocated for Georgia to receive candidate status. I believed it would give opposition parties a stronger platform, and they could campaign on a clear message: if you want to join the EU, do not vote for Georgian Dream. Unfortunately, the elections were so deeply manipulated that this strategy failed to gain traction. The ruling party's narrative, portraying pro-European voices

as warmongers intent on dragging Georgia into conflict, played on existing fears and proved effective. Add to this the government's increasing closeness to Russia and China, and the outlook becomes even more concerning. However, I have great confidence in Georgia's civil society, especially the younger generation. They will not accept this shift quietly. Some may leave the country; others will continue to fight for a European future. Either way, we must not abandon them. Looking ahead, Georgia's situation may remain frozen for some time, perhaps until the next round of elections. Much will depend on how international partners, particularly the US, deal with figures like Bidzina Ivanishvili and the political elite surrounding him. So far, sanctions have had little practical impact on civil society or the media environment. My biggest fear is that many capable and committed people will simply leave Georgia due to fear of persecution or economic instability. Armenia is in a very different position. Armenian leaders have often stressed how important Georgia's progress is to their own aspirations, recognising that regional momentum helps everyone. But after the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia finds itself under intense pressure politically, economically, and socially. Still, I am impressed by how Prime Minister Pashinyan has managed to hold his ground. He came to power as a political outsider and reformer, and against the odds, he has remained in office. His government has taken bold steps to distance Armenia from Russia's influence, such as removing Russian security personnel and customs officials. Despite the challenges, he has charted a clear course towards closer ties with the EU. With a large number of internally displaced persons and continued disinformation from both Russia and Azerbaijan, the pressure on his government is enormous. But so far, the public appears to be standing behind him, and polling remains relatively stable. Armenia's future with the EU, in my view, looks significantly more promising than Georgia's at the moment.

Armenia's future with the EU looks significantly more promising than Georgia's at the moment

would urge my colleagues in Brussels to begin treating Armenia as an independent partner no longer tying its prospects entirely to Georgia's progress.

5. As a former member of the EU-Russia Parliamentary Cooperation Committee between 2022-2024, do you believe that any attempt to bring Russia closer through cooperation, particularly after the Russian war against Georgia in 2008 and the invasion of Crimea in 2014, was in vain?

As we often say in Germany, you are always wiser after something has happened. However, looking back, it is clear that these efforts were in vain. Especially after the annexation of Crimea, it became evident that Russia had chosen an imperialist path. The signs had already been there following the war in Georgia, but Crimea made it impossible to ignore. From that point on, it was clear that the Kremlin had no interest in a real partnership with the European Union. The Gerasimov Doctrine, which emerged around 2012, made Russia's strategic direction unmistakable. It outlined an updated form of hybrid warfare that included cyberattacks, disinformation, and the systematic weakening of democratic institutions, both in its neighbourhood and in the European Union. The EU was increasingly seen by Moscow not just as a geopolitical rival but as a threat to its authoritarian model because of the values we represent: democracy, freedom, and prosperity. Many warned against continuing with a cooperation-based approach and called for stronger deterrence instead. But those warnings were often ignored. In Germany, in particular, there was significant strategic corruption, especially around energy policy and projects like Nord Stream. These links between political elites and Russian interests undermined a clear-eyed assessment of the Kremlin's actions.



Figure 7: Memorial for the fallen soldiers, May 2025, Odesa, Ukraine, Photo by EPIS member Jon Lott

That is why I believe the German Bundestag should launch a parliamentary inquiry into this period. We need transparency about the extent to which financial interests and political ties influenced key decisions. But unfortunately, since the SPD is still quite highly influenced by those actors and also in the conservative party, you have a lot of people who still work very closely with Putin and his oligarchs. It is also important to acknowledge how dismissive many Western European leaders were of concerns raised by our Eastern and Central European partners. Too often, they were dismissed as overly Russophobic. To the contrary, at the very moment Russia was waging war in eastern Ukraine, Germany deepened its energy dependence on the Kremlin. Not listening to our Eastern and Central European partners was a strategic error that made Europe more vulnerable. In the end, the policy of engagement not only failed to bring Russia closer, but it also allowed the regime to become more aggressive and better equipped to interfere in our democracies.

6. Disinformation, particularly from Russia, remains a big problem for democracies across Europe. The recent elections in Romania are a prime example. Through your work as an MEP, you have also dealt with foreign interference. How do you assess the current impact of (Russian) disinformation, and is enough being done to push back?

The short answer is no; not enough is being done at the European level to push back against disinformation, especially the kind orchestrated by Russia. To be honest, I do not even think that conventional military forces are Putin's primary tools anymore. The far greater threat comes from Russia's hybrid arsenal: disinformation, propaganda, infiltration, the financing of anti-EU and anti-democratic parties, and psychological operations designed to exploit social divisions. These tactics are smart, sophisticated, and dangerously effective.



Figure 8: The Romanian Palace of Parliament, 2025, Photo by Ferdinand Wegener

We have already seen this with political parties across Europe. In Germany, there's the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht and the AfD; in France, Le Pen's party received a significant loan from a Russian bank. In virtually every EU member state, there is at least one political force that is either openly or covertly supported by Moscow. What is especially alarming is how professionally Russia has built up its disinformation infrastructure. It is rooted in deep psychological analysis of our societies, our vulnerabilities, our fears, and our sentiments. Just recently, I shared a case where the Russian FSB was using minors in Ukraine to carry out attacks. That is the level of cynicism we are dealing with, and it's only the beginning. We are already seeing signs of similar tactics spreading elsewhere. If you look at young voters in Germany, particularly those aged 17 to 20, where up to 70 percent lean toward the AfD, it becomes clear how vulnerable this demographic is to influence. It would be relatively easy to manipulate them and activate them for sabotage or disinformation purposes, just as has happened in Ukraine. And we must not forget: disinformation is only one part of the picture. What we are facing is a full-spectrum hybrid threat: a mix

of disinformation, cyberattacks, political subversion, economic coercion, and even the orchestration of violence. It poses a fundamental threat to German society and to all democratic societies. We have already seen Russian fingerprints on elections and referendums across the continent: from France and Catalonia to the Dutch referendum on the EU-Ukraine agreement, and even in the 2016 US presidential election. These were not isolated incidents. They were warning signs that we largely ignored. And that is exactly the problem: we have not pushed back. Putin does not feel the pressure. We remain too polite, too complacent. We tell ourselves that defensive measures are enough. But they are not. Real security also requires deterrence. It requires resilience, not just in our institutions, but in our societies. Every citizen should be aware of the techniques and goals behind Russian interference, and we must urgently invest in public education, independent media, and civil society. There are good examples to follow, especially in the Baltic states. They are far ahead of us in both awareness and preparedness. We do not need to reinvent the wheel. We just need the political will to act.

We must defend the EU, but not by attacking others or through negativity. Instead, we need to create spaces where society as a whole values the EU as a positive force.



7. Why are you, as a former member of the European and German Parliament, so involved in Ukraine's security? Is it difficult to be staunchly pro-Ukrainian, including weapons deliveries, as a member of the Green Party, which has traditionally been seen as pacifistic?

For me, this is ultimately a battle between autocracy and democracy. It is not only about being a friend of Ukraine, although I certainly feel a strong obligation to support them. Russia's goal is not just to destroy Ukraine. It is to demonstrate that it can re-establish parts of the old Soviet or Tsarist empire, and it will not stop there.



Figure 9: Ukrainian-made BTR-3 IFV in Kyiv, 2018, Photo by Ferdinand Wegener

What the Kremlin really wants is to dismantle the European Union; this voluntary union of democratic states, built on shared values. No one forced the Baltic states, Sweden, Finland, or Austria to join. They chose to, freely and democratically. Russia, by contrast, uses violence and coercion. It kills civilians and then calls it 'liberation'. We offer partnership and rule of law. That contrast is precisely why so many still want to join the EU; and that is what threatens Putin most. Some still argue that we should cooperate with Russia, but that is a fantasy. The Russian regime has no intention of cooperating. It wants to subjugate. And that is why I support Ukraine; not just out of solidarity, but because Ukraine is now fighting for all of us. If Ukraine falls, the consequences will reach us too. Russian troops could one day be at the borders of Poland or Lithuania. Would Hungary or Slovakia hold firm? This

is not just Ukraine's fight. It is a geopolitical imperative for all who believe in liberty, democracy, and the rule of law. As for the second part of your question, no, it's not difficult to support Ukraine as a member of the Green Party. In fact, the Green Party has long moved beyond simple pacifism. Remember Joschka Fischer in 1999. It was the Greens, under his leadership, who took the difficult decision to support NATO intervention in the former Yugoslavia, to prevent a potential genocide in Kosovo. We had already witnessed Srebrenica. Many of us in the party were deeply aware of the danger at that time. The Greens have always stood clearly for human rights and for defending democratic values. Observing from the sidelines, doing nothing, may feel like pacifism, but as Joschka Fischer said then, that also makes you complicit. It is easy to talk about peace, but failing to act when people are

being murdered is a form of responsibility, too. The same applies today in Ukraine. Of course, there are internal debates. It's not always simple. But I would say that 85 to 90 percent of people now joining the Greens do so because of our firm and consistent support for Ukraine.

8. War and military vehicles produce enormous pollution of nature, cause vast destruction of the environment, and spew out copious amounts of CO2 and other harmful pollutants and toxic materials. How can you unify your beliefs to protect the world's climate with your wish to send more weapons to Ukraine?



Figure 10: Destroyed Russian BTR-80 APC in Kyiv, 2018, Photo by Ferdinand Wegener

This war is not just about territory. It is also a fossil-fuel-powered assault on democracy and decarbonisation. Take the example of the Kakhovka dam. The Russian bombing of that hydropower facility did not just destroy infrastructure; it caused an environmental catastrophe, killing ecosystems and wildlife and displacing thousands of people. Some might claim the area is now “more natural,” but in truth, the destruction released huge amounts of CO2 and devastated the landscape. And that is just one example. Russia has shelled wind farms, bombed solar installations, and destroyed civilian energy grids. Every piece of infrastructure we have to rebuild—from power plants to

It is actually very simple. Every weapon we send now is not just about Ukraine's defence. It is also about defending our ability to protect the climate, uphold our values, and preserve our democratic systems. Look at the reality. There are no climate movements in Russia. There is no large-scale rollout of heat pumps, no national strategy for renewable energy, and no commitment to climate neutrality. Russia's economy remains entirely dependent on the sale of fossil fuels. While sanctions have somewhat reduced that revenue, especially through the price cap on Russian oil, Putin continues to rely on fossil exports as his main source of income.

water systems—comes with a massive environmental cost. Cement, steel, construction, and transport all emit CO2. If we can prevent this destruction by acting now, we can reduce both human suffering and environmental damage. So yes, defending Ukraine militarily is entirely compatible with protecting the environment. In fact, it is a precondition for it. Without freedom, sovereignty, and democratic space there can be no real climate action—not in Ukraine and not in Europe either.

9. Is Chancellor Merz's pivot in defense policy, Bundeswehr rearmament, and more aid for Ukraine believable? Will we ever see German Taurus missiles hitting Russian military targets?

He has placed this issue so high on his agenda that, no matter whom you speak to, many people afford him a great deal of credibility. However, in the end, what really matters is seeing concrete action. We must increase production capacities. I am deeply concerned that

Russia operates around the clock. It is not a standard 35-hour workweek for them; everyone available is mobilised for weapon production. Meanwhile, we still have limited manufacturing capacity rather than mass production. There must be a shift towards a "war economy" — a phrase I dislike — focusing on what is urgently required right now, such as drones, electronic warfare systems, and many other critical components for Ukraine.

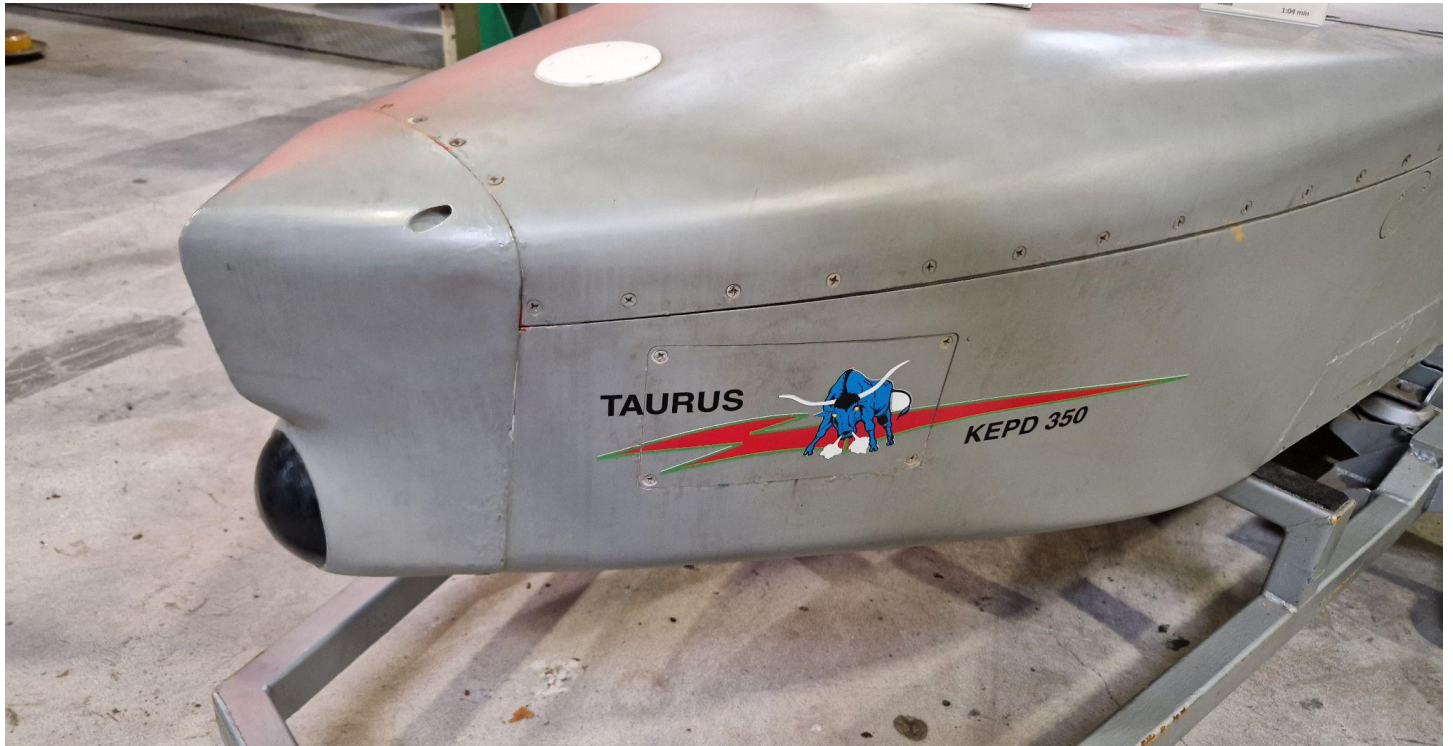


Figure 11: Taurus Missile at the German Army Collection in Koblenz, 2025, Photo by Ferdinand Wegener

Only then can we fairly judge whether Merz is serious or merely engaging in rhetoric. His visit at the start of his tenure, alongside Stoltenberg, Tusk, and Macron, was an

important and impressive signal to Ukraine. But now he must deliver on those promises. That said, from what I heard during my recent visit to

Berlin, Merz and some in his inner circle sometimes come across a little like cowboys. They enter a room pretending to know everything, but this is often not backed by sufficient expertise. It feels more like showmanship. I sincerely hope that, for Ukraine's sake, they will learn to listen and make the right decisions. What matters most is achieving victory for Ukraine. That is our shared goal; nothing else matters at the moment.

10. In your view, what is the most pressing issue facing European societies today and how should it be addressed?

It is easy to talk about peace, but failing to act when people are being murdered is a form of responsibility too

From my perspective, what I see is this: for a generation — and I am not very old, but probably old enough — the European Union and its

integration were always seen as a positive, upward trend. It was clear we would take in more countries and deepen our cooperation. It was very much an elite project handled by those in Brussels, but it was never questioned negatively. We trusted that they were making the right decisions, and we believed these decisions were in our interest. Now, however, with the rise of Euroscepticism, the growth of right-wing parties, and increasing doubt about where

the EU's money goes, the attitude has shifted. People ask, "How does the European Union benefit Germans? How does it benefit Lower Saxony? What is in it for me?" Everything has become transactional, focusing on immediate self-interest. We must defend the EU, but not by attacking others or through negativity. Instead, we need to create spaces where society as a whole values the EU as a positive force. We must defend the EU, but not by attacking others or through negativity. Instead, we need to create spaces where society as a whole values the EU as a positive force. They need to say, "No, I will not vote for

those who want to close borders forever, or who want to expel my foreign friends." Diversity and pluralism are fundamental to the European Union. We must explain clearly why the European Union is so special, why it is worth fighting for, and why we can be proud to be members. I am not a fan of national pride in the usual sense. I have never sung the German national anthem. But I do believe in European pride. We need to cultivate a European public sphere with European television, European news, and so on. This will, in turn, strengthen our national societies too. We need to be proud to be European citizens.

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Dr. Hans-Christoph Atzpodien

About Defence Readiness 2030

What needs to be achieved

Photo: Bundesverband der Deutschen Sicherheits- und
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About the Article

Can Europe defend itself in an era of rising threats and U.S. retrenchment? Dr. Hans-Christoph Atzpodien, Managing Director of the BDSV, argues that Defence Readiness 2030 demands stronger European cooperation, streamlined regulations, and expanded industrial capacity—essential steps toward a resilient and self-reliant defence posture.

About the Author

Dr. Hans-Christoph Atzpodien is the Managing Director of the Federation of German Security and Defence Industries (BDSV). A qualified lawyer and former Thyssen-Krupp executive, he has long been an advocate for stronger European defence cooperation and the expansion of industrial capacities. Since 2017, he has led the BDSV and is regarded as a prominent voice of the German and European defence industry, promoting a stronger industrial base, deeper European collaboration, and a pragmatic security and defence policy.

The Joint White Paper published by EU's High Representative Kaja Kallas and EU Defence Commissioner Andrius Kubilius in March 2025 was titled "on Defence Readiness 2030". Yet, it addresses more than just urgent readiness. It also focuses on Europe's ability to provide conventional armament for itself, as demanded by the Trump administration since February 2025, when the new US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth visited his NATO colleagues for the first time in Brussels. Therefore, we are confronted with two different challenges: one being the short time available for defence readiness by 2030 (at the latest), and in the mid- to long-term, making sure that European NATO countries will be able to provide their own conventional military protection. With this background, it is good to see that Europe has finally heeded the wake-up calls, not only from Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, but also from President Trump's demand that 5 % of the GDP be spent by each of the European NATO countries for defence and defence-related infrastructure. While individual EU countries have to fulfil their commitments to NATO, the EU's ReArm Europe programme is well suited to support such efforts, especially given the extremely short timelines. With the common goals addressed in the above mentioned Joint White Paper, and backed by the Defence Readiness Omnibus Plan, the EU appears to be on the right track to make Europe's defence efforts more effective and collaborative. Germany's new coalition is drawing the right conclusions by massively increasing Germany's defence budgets over the years to come. By 2029, Germany will spend 3.5 % of its GDP for defence and most likely the promised additional 1.5 % for defence-related infrastructure-measures. These are enormous sums, amounting to about 40 % of the projected federal budget for 2029. This reflects both the urgency of the situation, as well as the existing hybrid threats and attacks from which are already suffering. Some of these threats are neither widely known nor mentioned publicly, for example hostile drones monitoring our critical infras-

I am confident that the European defence industry already provides most of the technologies needed to equip our armed forces.

structure. The reason for that is that we are still seeking appropriate protection measures. At least funding will from now on no longer serve as an excuse for failing to address these issues adequately. Another field, which in the meantime has been identified and addressed, concerns burdensome regulatory hurdles. These must be removed both on the European as well as on the national level. To this end, the EU Commission initiated the "Defence Readiness Omnibus" package of measures, while the German federal government presented draft legislation to accelerate planning and procurement. This national draft contains several points long advocated by our federation under the label of creating an "economy of resilience". We can say with some pride that our lobbying seems to have been quite successful so far. However, exactly such success, will from now on translate into even higher demands for our industry's ability to deliver. At present, we are confronted with aggregated orders by our own national customer as well as from other European clients, all

of whom are on the course to buy, buy and buy. Industry therefore needs clarity on output volumes, in order to adjust capacities

to the speed required. This may or may not involve new resources, which so far have not been used producing defence equipment. The good news is that our industry is receiving a range of such offers and inquiries. The problem could be that most of these resources still need to be adapted to defence-related purposes by earning additional certificates and qualifications. The EU is launching further supportive initiatives under its programme ReArm Europe. One of ReArm Europe's core elements is SAFE ("Security Action for Europe"). Germany will not directly benefit from the SAFE programme, as the €150 billion at stake will primarily attract countries that can take advantage of the preferential interest conditions offered by SAFE. Nevertheless, SAFE may encourage other EU Member States to cooperate with German partners, potentially also SMEs. All this, however, will only evolve in more cooperative products, if and to the extent that, the

European governments and MoD's will be prepared to procure such products. Political determination by EU Member States to foster armaments cooperation through their respective decisions will remain key to success. Finally, during the US-EU talks about tariffs, it was confirmed that Europe continue to purchase military equipment from US-based suppliers. This stands in contrast to the EU White Paper, which clearly expressed the ambition to reduce procurement from outside the EU, particularly from the US, while at the same time setting the goal of increasing purchases from EU-based production. Both intentions, in my view, must be balanced. I am confident that the European defence industry already provides most of the technologies needed to equip our armed forces. Nevertheless, there are - and will continue to be - certain areas, in which cooperation with US manufacturers, and related procurement, makes a lot of sense for reasons of speed and technology. Overall, the roughly 380 member companies of our association are currently facing the

biggest challenge of the last decades: Fifteen years ago, the industry was largely neglected; only four years ago, under the European "Green Deal", defence was branded as socially harmful. Now however, it must rapidly scale up production with the utmost diligence and speed to provide protection for our soldiers and deterrence for NATO. In the meantime, our society's overall mind-set has shifted and the necessity of defence and armaments is again more widely accepted.. However, "pockets of resistance" remain, for example in universities, where so-called "civil clauses" are retained. Such clauses ban military- and defence-related topics from curricula and research agendas. Such attitudes do not reflect the contemporary threat environment. Public opinion needs to understand, that strength and our ability to deter aggression are the prerequisites for peace, security, freedom and consequently for sustainability. It's the only way to preserve our way of life not only for ourselves, but also for future generations.

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Matthias Hackler

Shifting Paradigms

Chinese Scholars on the Development of EU-China Relations

About the Article

How do Chinese scholars perceive a changing Europe? Matthias Hackler examines recent Chinese expert debates on EU–China relations, revealing growing pessimism about Europe’s political and economic decline. While traditional views still frame the relationship as cooperative and non-confrontational, emerging analyses suggest a gradual shift—driven by Europe’s protectionist turn, strategic anxieties, and the war in Ukraine—raising questions about whether old paradigms can still hold.

About the Author

Dr. Matthias Hackler is a policy advisor to MEP Engin Eroglu (Free Voters) in the European Parliament, focusing on foreign affairs and China. Before joining Eroglu’s office, he worked with Reinhard Bütikofer, former Chair of the Parliament’s Delegation for Relations with China. He holds a PhD in International Relations from Renmin University of China and has worked for the EU Delegation to China and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Beijing.

1. Understanding policy trends

Over the last ten years, the multilayered relationship between the EU and China has become increasingly complicated. The EU's latest policy document on China, the 2019 Strategic Outlook, hinted at a changing balance of challenges and opportunities presented by China. The document noted that China's economic power and political influence had grown at an unprecedented rate, and that the country now bore greater responsibility for upholding the rule-based international order. Furthermore, the EU began to view China not only as a negotiating and collaborative partner, but also as an economic competitor and a systemic rival (European Commission, 2019). This European perspective reflects an underlying trend that became increasingly visible since 2016, when European views of China have shifted, with growing concerns over Chinese investments, trade disputes, human rights issues, and diplomatic tensions, intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic, mutual sanctions, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The EU consistently communicates its China policy through documents and speeches, making it relatively easy to comprehend how and why this policy is developing. In contrast, China's government rarely does the same. It has only issued three white papers on EU-China relations, the latest of which was published in late 2018, just months before the EU's Strategic Outlook. While the Chinese government provides transcripts of speeches and meetings with European dignitaries, the content is often repetitive and the positions taken are remarkably consistent. Therefore, observing discussions among Chinese think tank experts on EU-China relations is crucial to understanding shifting Chinese perspectives and identifying emerging policy trends. As Abb (2015) has highlighted, Chinese think tanks and experts play an important role in connecting policymakers and academia. They can provide ideas and policy suggestions, but also provide contextualization and interpretations of Chinese government policies. The following text will therefore analyze recently published discussions by Chinese experts about the EU-China relationship. They can offer ideas and policy suggestions as well as con-

textualize and interpret Chinese government policies. In terms of the timeframe, it mainly analyses texts published since the beginning of this year, coinciding with Donald Trump's return to the White House, and the subsequent new dynamics it initiated internationally. In terms of content, the text summarizes Chinese experts' perspectives on the EU's role in an increasingly challenging international landscape and analyzes their assessment of the future trajectory of the EU-China relationship. The guiding question is whether long-held paradigmatic positions about the EU are starting to change among Chinese experts.

2. Europe in decline

The Chinese expert literature reviewed for this article generally reflects a negative or pessimistic view of current EU developments. Experts describe a state of stagnation or decline. They are concerned about political trends, such as fragmentation due to political polarization – meaning an increasing division between left- and right-wing extremism – which, in their view, is starting to dominate discussions in Europe. This trend is leading to an EU that is increasingly inward-looking, both politically and economically, and to growing disagreements at the European level, making it harder for the European Council to make decisions (Feng et al, 2025). Some observers have pointed out that Europeans have tried to solve these problems through different means, for example by addressing the democratic deficit or by introducing a Europe of two speeds. However, they conclude that the potential for a way out of this situation is limited since the “EU only talks and doesn't act” (Guanchazhewang, 2025). This situation also influences the EU's policy on China, since domestic fragmentation in European politics suppresses voices in favor of rational and pragmatic cooperation with China (Feng et al, 2025). The second issue on which Chinese experts are becoming increasingly pessimistic is economic development in the EU. They point out that successive crises have impacted the European economy, including the global financial crisis and the European debt crisis.

These crises have brought about a decline in European competitiveness and stagnating EU integration (Feng et al, 2025; Zhang, Xin, Jian, Yan, 2025; Sun, 2025). Furthermore, some experts highlight internal fragmentation as a factor that has caused the EU to miss out on major technological advances, such as the “fourth industrial revolution” (Guanchazhewang, 2025). Sun (2025) notes that the EU has been trying to address its declining competitiveness since the early 1990s, but without success:

Since the 2008 global financial crisis, the EU’s share of the global economy has been steadily declining. Not only has it failed to achieve “reindustrialization”, but its industrial structure has not seen significant optimization. This is evident in the continued consolidation of traditional strengths like machinery, chemicals, and motor vehicles, while high-tech sectors such as information technology have developed slowly, and the competitiveness of emerging industries has declined rather than improved.

According to her, this has happened because the underlying framework conditions of the European development model have changed, which was based on peace in Europe and US security guarantees, good relations with Russia and access to cheap energy, a deepening of the EU single markets, the rise of emerging economies in Asia, and certain demographic trends. According to Sun:

These favorable factors allowed Europe to enjoy a “comfort zone” for over 30 years. Although economic growth remained modest, the issue of “competitiveness” did not spark significant concern in European political and economic circles until the COVID-19 pandemic.

A third point that has been identified in the literature is a decline of European attraction – of its “normative power identity”. According to this view, after the end of the Cold War, the EU leveraged globalization to export its European model, thereby expanding its trade rules and esta-

blishing its identity as a normative power. However, due to the EU’s declining relative strength, its status as a normative power has weakened, leading to “unprecedented strategic anxieties” when facing “shifts in the international balance of power and geopolitical changes”. (Jin, 2025).

3. Shifting paradigms?

Against the background described above, the assessment is that many of the EU policies are, in one way or another, driven by European anxieties. Nevertheless, Chinese researchers believe that, due to Europe’s mounting problems, it needs to cooperate with China to drive economic development (Zhang, Xin, Jian, Yan, 2025). Others think that, despite existing problems, there are currently favorable conditions for EU-China rapprochement. These conditions are primarily related to the changing dynamics between the EU and the US following Donald Trump’s return to the White House. In this context, some researchers have noticed a potential change to the trilogy of definitions of partner, competitor and rival (Feng et al, 2025). Most of the reviewed literature asserts that the EU-China relationship is globally significant due to its contribution to global economic growth and prosperity, as well as its political importance in preventing a new Cold War. They believe that, as long as the EU and China work together, bloc confrontation will not occur. This is often combined with the desire for the creation of a multipolar world order in which the EU acts as an independent pole (in this context, ‘independent’ means ‘independent of the US-EU alliance’) (Feng, Lin, Men, Li, Song, 2025). Underlying these observations are two paradigmatic assessments of the relationship. The first refers to its economic and trade dimensions. This dimension has been referred to as the ‘ballast stone’, a term which refers to the counterweight placed at the bottom of ships to maintain stability by lowering the center of gravity. Therefore, the economic and trade relationship is regarded as a stabilizer, somewhat independent of fluctuating political or diplomatic relations. One could argue that, regardless of the state of political relations, as long as the economic and trade relationship remains strong, the overall relationship will not be

negatively impacted. The second long-held paradigm is that there is „no fundamental conflict of interest“ between the EU and China. This refers mainly to the geopolitical level, describing how, unlike the United States, the EU does not play a political or security-related role in China’s neighborhood. These two paradigmatic views could be seen as the more conservative or traditional views of EU-China relations. For many years, this has been the mainstream position in the expert community in China. Over the last five years, and particularly since the onset of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, tensions in almost all areas of EU-China relations have increased. Leading European EU-China experts have described the EU’s China policy as having shifted towards a “robust and realistic” approach to China (García-Herrero, Vasselier, 2024). This shift included the adoption of trade defense instruments to address unfair Chinese trade practices. This has not gone unnoticed in China, although the current mainstream opinion has not changed significantly. However, over the course of the last years, subtle changes have emerged in the two key paradigms. Firstly, some of the reviewed articles describe EU’s trade policies as becoming more protectionist, politicized and securitized. According to this view, the European Commission has altered its perception of trade and competitiveness, linking it to security concerns. In this context, researchers often point out that this shift has “anti-China connotations”. Chinese researchers describe the EU moving away from openness towards strategic autonomy, with protectionism at its core. De-risking and economic security are viewed as targeting China, and this has become a political consensus in Europe (Jin, 2025; Cheng, 2025). Another researcher points out that strategic autonomy should not only be viewed as an attempt to become more independent of the US, but also as a means of self-protection in the economic arena. The main goal is therefore to protect the EU’s strategic industries and prevent over-dependen-

ce on China (Song, 2025). Current developments within the EU with regard to its competitiveness agenda are seen as being driven by European anxieties (Sun, 2025). Zhao (2025) goes further:

The EU’s competition with, and even confrontation toward, China will not only hinder the future development of China-EU cooperation but may also jeopardize existing cooperative achievements. If this trend continues, it could undermine the foundation of the economic bal- last that has long stabilized China-EU relations.

Secondly, in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine, Chinese experts have noted that the EU views China and Russia as intertwined, although they believe this perception is based on a misjudgment of China’s policy towards Russia and unrealistic expectations of China (Jin, 2025).

Moreover, they believe that the EU is treating China’s position on the war in Ukraine as a prerequisite for developing EU-China relations. This means that the Ukraine ‘crisis’, as Chinese researchers refer to it, is the

primary factor disrupting the development of healthy EU-China relations (Jin, 2025). Zhao (2025) notes that, in the context of the war in Ukraine, the EU’s perception of China might shift towards viewing it as a comprehensive rival or security threat, and “the EU’s increasingly tough stance and actions in handling security matters related to China have undoubtedly made China-EU relations more complex”. This trend could lead to competition and confrontation. However, according to him, although the EU’s China policy is hardening, the process of readjustment is not yet complete, which opens up the possibility of reversal or delay. But, as Jin (2025) highlights:

Most of the reviewed literature asserts that the EU-China relationship is globally significant due to its contribution to global economic growth and prosperity, as well as its political importance in preventing a new Cold War.

The EU's shift toward geopolitical competition in its perception of China poses a serious challenge to the long-standing strategic consensus that "China and the EU have no geopolitical conflicts"

Song (2025) notes that Chinese experts generally believe there is no fundamental conflict of interest between the EU and China. However, in his view the introduction of „systemic rivalry“ of 2019 into EU discourse marks a „substantive shift in bilateral relations at the factual level“. According to Song, this term highlights a fundamental shift in the nature of the bilateral relationship, reflecting concrete policy differences and systemic differences.

4. Making the correct choice

Europe is seen as an actor grappling with severe problems after several years of crisis. It is unable to reform its economic model, and strong political divisions have led to stagnation in the process of EU integration. In response to this situation, which has sparked concerns about Europe's declining international standing, Europeans have taken actions that have severely impacted EU-China relations. According to the expert literature reviewed for this article, the EU's policy adjustments are the result of a misjudgment based on a misunderstanding of China's policies and intentions. This reflects the underlying sentiment that China is not responsible for the deterioration of its relationship with Europe. In fact, there is hardly any acknowledgement of legitimate European concerns in the area of trade or with regard to European security. Any such concerns are usually dismissed as ‚anti-China‘ narratives. Therefore, the responsibility to improve the relationship lies with the Europeans. In response to a question about the EU's announcement to rebalance its trade relationship with China, a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs

spokesperson stated that the Europeans should rebalance their mindset instead. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025). With Trump's return to the White House and Europe increasingly under pressure, it is, therefore, up to the Europeans to grasp the „China opportunity“ to benefit from each other's development (Cui, 2025). The EU's hardening policy toward China has sparked discussions about the validity of the economic stabilizer and the „no fundamental conflicts of interest“ paradigm. For the time being, no broad consensus has been reached among Chinese EU experts on these issues. Prominent experts in China continue to support these paradigms. It remains to be seen how this discussion will develop over the next month, especially if the Commission proposes new measures to rebalance the economic relationship, and whether more experts will engage with it. A comprehensive change in understanding these two paradigms could affect China's future policies and possibly lead to an intensification of existing frictions in areas such as trade and geopolitics. During the last EU-China summit in July, Chinese President Xi Jinping reminded both sides to „firmly grasp the correct direction of the development of China-Europe relations“ (Xinhuashe, 2025 a). During China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Slovenia in September, the minister stated that „amid great changes unseen in a century, one needs to make the correct choice“ (Xinhuashe, 2025 b). Given the ideological worldview of the Chinese leadership that it correctly understands the historical trends – that amid „great changes unseen in a century“ the „East is rising and the West is declining“ – and the unwillingness to accept positions, such as European concerns, which may deviate from this „correct“ understanding, one could assume that the responsibility for making the correct choice lies only with the Europeans. The time may come to ask what could happen if one side does not make the correct choice.

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EPIS **BASICS:**

HEDGING AGAINST UNCERTAINTY

In EPIS Basics, our authors explain basic knowledge of international foreign affairs and security policies. This encompasses basic theories, organisations and events. This series is presented in depth here in the magazine. You can also find other smaller contributions on our Instagram page

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Pablo Mathis studied Security Studies at Leiden University in the Netherlands and now pursued a Master at the King's College London. Pablo's main area of interest is national security, with a special focus on great-power competition and nuclear and conventional deterrence. When analyzing these issues, Pablo believes in adopting a historical perspective and building on various international relations theories.



1. Hedging Against Uncertainty

With tensions on the rise, many states face an alignment dilemma. Should they ally with the US, China, or Russia? All options bear significant uncertainties about the great powers' intentions. In light of this, particularly Southeast Asian states have adopted a hedging strategy. Although hedging is a contested concept, this Basics instalment seeks to provide more clarity about this often-used but little-understood concept. Specifically, this article builds on Kuik's (2021) clear three-point characterisation of hedging as a middle, opposite, and fallback position. Contemporary references to Singapore are used to elucidate the concept further.

2. A Middle Position

At the most basic level, hedging denotes a policy where a state refuses to unequivocally align itself with a major power. In doing so, states that hedge defy categorisation as balancing or bandwagoning. For example, Singapore has not committed to any comprehensive military alliances with either the US or China.

3. An Opposite Position

To help maintain the middle position, states that hedge pursue opposite policies. These opposite policies cancel each other out, preventing a state from aligning itself too closely with a power. To prevent alienating the US or China, Singapore has conducted military exercises with both the US and China. However, these opposite policies can also cut across the political, economic, and military domains. For example, a state might compensate for closer economic relations with China by buying US military

equipment. Lastly, preventing clear alignment can sometimes involve deferring to a power on some issues, while defying said power on other matters.

4. A Fallback Position

Ultimately, hedging serves to create a fallback position in light of the uncertain intentions of great powers. In Southeast Asia, countries remain wary of China and the US. Although China offers economic incentives through instruments like the Belt and Road Initiative, its assertive behaviour over islands in the South China Sea has created

uncertainties about China's benign intentions. On the other hand, since Obama's pivot to Asia in 2011, the US has devoted increasing attention towards countering China. However, recurring Trump presidencies have also called into question the US's commitment to the region. Precisely these uncertainties have motivated hedging. Should the US prove unreliable or China's intentions malign, the Southeast Asian states want to maintain good relations with the other superpower as a fallback.

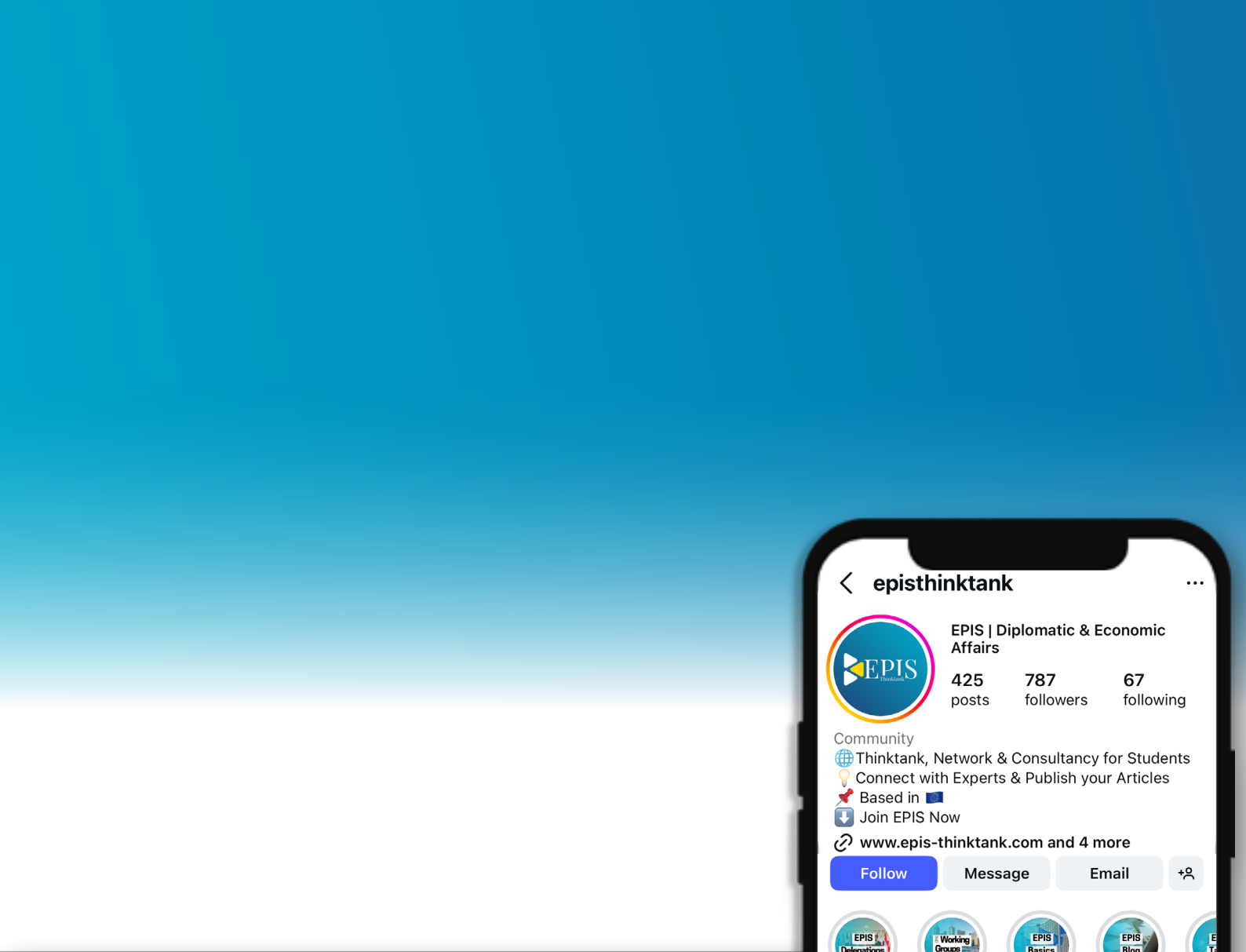
5. An Uncertain Future

As illustrated, hedging is a concept engulfed by uncertainty. Not only do states hedge against uncertainty, but academics themselves remain uncertain about the precise motivations, tools, and types of hedging. Nevertheless, Kuik's (2021) conceptualisation of hedging as a middle, opposite, and fallback position can serve as a starting point for any observer interested in the developments in international relations and academia.

Hedging denotes a policy where a state refuses to unequivocally align itself with a major power.

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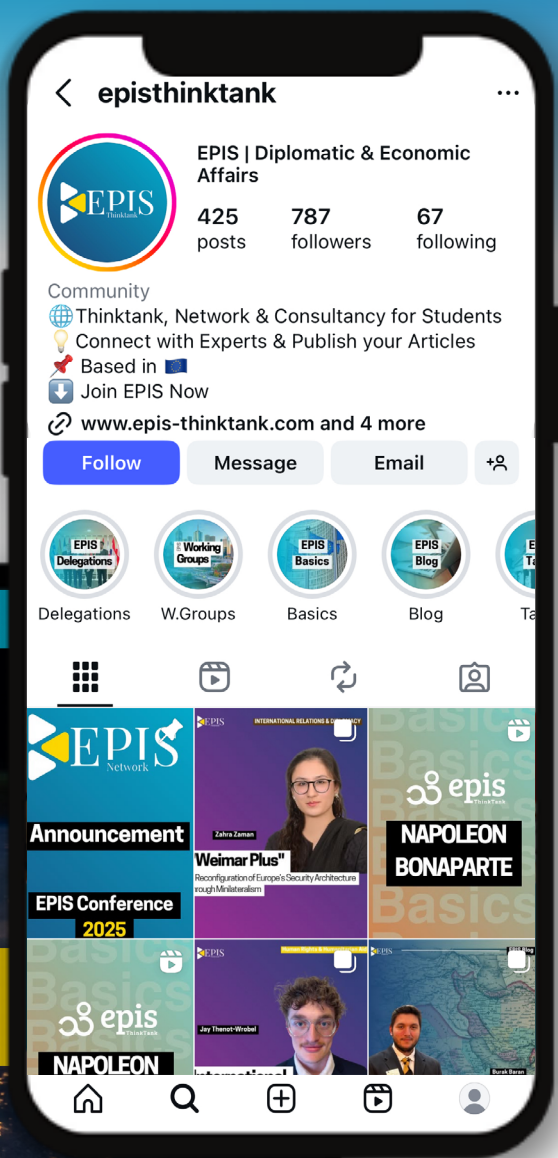
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