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EPIS REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS & DIPLOMACY

INTERVIEW WITH DR. FRANÇOIS CHIHCHUNG WU

Taiwanese political scientist and diplomat

Interwiew with Prof. Dr. Felix Kuhn – Minilateralism in East Asia

Main Question: How do minilateral arrangements shape East Asian cooperation? Argument: Forums like ASEAN provide broad frameworks, while minilaterals (Quad, trilateral dialogues) enable focused security cooperation alongside economic ties to China and reliance on the U.S. Conclusion: Minilaterals complement larger institutions, offering flexible, pragmatic, and targeted regional cooperation.

Rethinking Security in a Post-Westphalian World

Main Question: How does the growing role of non-state actors transform global security beyond the state's traditional Westphalian claim to absolute power? Argument: Non-state actors increasingly shape security through Track 1.5/2 diplomacy, hybrid platforms, and governance networks, softening hierarchical state control. Conclusion: This shift toward decentralized, network-based security is inevitable and adaptive, though it raises concerns about fragmentation and legitimacy.

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Editorial

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Minilateralism, digital diplomacy & new actors in 21st-century IR

Dear Reader,

In this changing world and pivots on cooperation, old ideas are forced to evolve and adjust accordingly to the new needs.After the post-war order and the creation of the League of Nations that later evolved into the widely known United Nations, peace and cooperation found its platform. However, the modern world is starting to lose trust towards the big blocks after their potential and security mechanisms failed. This realization, explored in Marie's analysis of Post-Westphalian Diplomacy, accelerates a fundamental rethinking of global security. That's why countries from all parts of the world are turning towards alternative models of cooperation.

This search for new frameworks defines the contemporary international arena. We see the urgency of this pivot reflected in the emergence of minilateral initiatives and NATO's hybrid partnerships, offering tailored solutions where broader consensus has fractured. Simultaneously, we examine how powers are deploying non-traditional tools, including digital diplomacy and PSYOPS campaigns, and dissect the geopolitical significance of strategic investments, looking closely at China's Belt and Road Initiative and the vital potential of the new EU-India partnership.

In this report you will find analysis on how the importance of different actors on the international arena is changing—from the diplomatic role of small states to the strategic affirmation of the Global South—and how the approach changed on different continents. You will see what young, aspiring professionals pay attention to and how their fresh eyes analyse international affairs.

This report is to mark the changing dynamic of international relations in the XXI century and highlight the most revolutionary pivots. In the name of our writers, we wish you a pleasant reading.

Anna Stanislawska
Editor of the EPIS International Relations and Diplomacy Report Group

About the Article

Main Question: How does the growing role of non-state actors transform global security beyond the state's traditional Westphalian claim to absolute power? Argument: Non-state actors increasingly shape security through Track 1.5/2 diplomacy, hybrid platforms, and governance networks, softening hierarchical state control. Conclusion: This shift toward decentralized, network-based security is inevitable and adaptive, though it raises concerns about fragmentation and legitimacy.

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Marie Klostermeier is pursuing a B.A. in Governance an 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

The Westphalian system also made states the principal accepted actors on the international stage. This system itself is as old as the Peace of Westphalia of 1648. Yet over the past 377 years, global governance has changed profoundly. It is no longer only nation-states or their intergovernmental organizations that shape world politics. In today's interconnected and complex global order, the classical notion of the Westphalian claim to absolute state control is increasingly under pressure. Non-state actors are playing an ever more significant role. This development now even affects security policy, the core domain of state sovereignty. Therefore, this article addresses the research question: How does the growing role of non-state actors transform the concept of global security beyond the state's absolute power claim on the international stage? The discussion sheds light on alternative forms of international cooperation and initiatives that operate beyond traditional state mechanisms. In this context, different tracks of diplomatic negotiations by hybrid forms of cooperation, think tanks, and network-based formats all play a role. The analysis explores how these non-state actors act as informal negotiators, how governance increasingly functions within networks rather than hierarchical structures, and how hybrid forms of diplomacy are employed. It becomes evident that the Westphalian system, with subordination of all other actors under states, is gradually softening and being replaced by a more decentralized, network-based system and flexible modes of collaboration between states and non-state actors. However, this post-Westphalian understanding of security also raises important questions about democratic legitimacy, accountability, the fragmentation of the security architecture. The article thus aims to show that non-state security actors are establishing a complementary and adaptive form of diplomacy, one that highlights the shift in global security from exclusive state control toward dynamic, pluralistic networks. This development, however, must be critically assessed in order to determine whether it should indeed be regarded as a positive evolution.

Track Two Diplomacy:
Informal dialogue led by non-state actors to generate ideas that support and influence official peace negotiations.

2. Different Tracks of Diplomacy

In a state driven international order, Track One Diplomacy, referring to conflict resolution negotiations between official top leadership state actors, seems the most obvious platform for dialogue. But the landscape of conflict resolution is more differentiated. Track One negotiation can be complemented through various forms of non-state actor involvement (Federer, 2021). Even though classic diplomacy remains generally state-centric, especially in the 21st century we have seen a rise in non-state actors with global ambitions (Grincheva and Kelley, 2019). This track division is part of a systematic view, dividing conflict parties into different tracks. Track One and a Half Diplomacy is closely related to Track One Diplomacy and includes unofficial dialogues among official actors. Track Two Diplomacy, referring to "informal, facilitated dialogues between influential representatives of conflicting parties to develop insights and ideas that can be transferred to formal negotiations and also communicated to the broader public." (Jones et al., 2025, p. 169), enables Non-State Actors to act as informal negotiators. It refers to non-state actors with relatively high influence, like civil society elites. The least formal track, Track Three, includes community-based grassroot organizations (Jones et al. 2025).

Figure 1: Adaptation of the Lederach's pyramid by Jones et al. (2025)

All these tracks can come into play at different stages of negotiation and in different grades of formalization. Especially Track Two and Track One and a Half can be found in various forms. It reaches from the beginning and the opening of dialogue, even before there is a formal process to broaden the scope of the negotiation by bringing in more actors. But it also includes various steps in between like keeping dialogue open, while official forms are stuck or frozen, or providing a space for detailed work that is not in the agenda of official actors (Jones et al. 2025). Coming from this differentiation, in the following more specific cases will be assessed that exemplify what non-state actors can really do within this framework. By positioning the actors on this scale, it is not predetermined what activities they can offer. These reach from providing platforms or being an informal negotiator to outreach through hybrid hubs and governance networks.

2.1 (In)formal Platforms

The influence of non-state actors does not come by excluding or bypassing state actors, especially in Track One and a Half. But they have the power to influence international diplomacy by providing and shaping the way state actors come up with policy decisions and diplomatic solutions. One of the most common ways non-state actors can influence this arena where and how state-actors meet is by providing platforms with varying degrees of officiality. This relates to the role of keeping dialogue open by providing a steady format. These hybrid dialogue formats are mostly part of Track one and a Half by being led by non-state actors but supported by the attendance and given authority by state actors. This type of discursive space is especially valuable because it is under less tension than formal state meetings. It allows non-state actors to encourage more out-of-the-box solutions, besides provi-

ding a habit of dialogue (Longhini & Zimmerman 2021). This becomes clearer when looking at a very prominent example of this platform building through non-state actors: The Munich Security Conference (MSC). The MSC is the oldest Track One and a Half security forum in Europe, founded in 1963 and is potentially still the most relevant one. It attracts the most influential leaders and allows the discussion of a range of security-relevant topics in different formats of discourse. It benefits from its layered architecture in a balancing act between public incineration and flexible informal gatherings. The conference offers more public aspects like panel discussions but also invitation-only, off-record sessions. A reason for productivity is that the MSC doesn't force participants into false demonstrative unity, since the goal is not to produce a final communiqué or something similar. Participants are meant to become more approachable to enhance real dialogue. The MSC strengthens this goal, for example by alphabetical seating instead of hierarchical seating to maximize interactions (Longhini & Zimmerman, 2021). This enables numerous bilateral meetings and hundreds of confidential side events. These conversations, shaping the future of worldwide security policy, would most probably never happen in this amount and informality, if there were not important non-state actors like the Munich Security Conference, or the Asian Shangri-La Dialogue, that use their power in global governance in the era after the singular Westphalian-power-system.

> **"Non-state actors increasingly shape global security by using hybrid platforms and informal negotiations to influence outcomes once controlled exclusively by states."**

2.2 Informal Negotiators

But non-state actors can also enforce their power without state actors in the first round, by including other non-state actors and societal elites, in the process. Through Track Two Diplomacy, private foundations, NGOs or universities get military advisors or civil experts in contact with foreign experiences, and alternative solutions to problems, so that these elites begin to think about security issues in a cooperative manner. This stage of socialization of a conflict focuses on making influential elites think differently about regional security, which afterwards affects state actors and Track One Diplomacy (Kaye, 2007). Notable actors in this area are historically The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) or The Gulf Research Center (GRC). Oftentimes non-state actors organize Track Two workshops, even though many regional projects are also state funded. By including regional and social elites, track two dialogues can tailor concepts to better fit within the local security environment. These ideas can then be carried to a broader audience by including media or politics. The success of such initiatives depends on civil cooperation, which can be difficult to achieve in the conflicted societies in question. Nevertheless, Track Two initiatives can have real policy effects, especially over longer periods of time. However, this refers to a common dilemma in Track Two efforts, which means that the longer unofficial negotiations last, the more likely it is that participants lose influence and connection to the current government. An example of a successful Track Two Initiative would be the Stimson Center Dialogues, which enable confidence-building measures, which have resulted in implementation at official levels, for example in the ballistic missile flight test notification agreement (Kaye, 2007).

2.3 Governance Networks

The third portrayed way non-state-actors can become active in diplomacy is through governance networks. The Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), founded in 2011, is an example of how an informal, apolitical and multilateral platform can offer a way for non-state actors to participate. The forum aims to coordinate international efforts in the fight against terrorism and support the implementation of UN commitments. Thereby the focus is not formal norm-setting, but recommendation and toolkits. The actors involved range from states and international organizations to security companies and scientific communities giving the forum a hybrid structure that shows how non-state actors are included in governance formats

and increasingly co-produce global security outcomes. The GCTF also makes it clear that global governance is less an abstract organizing principle than an empirically established structure. By linking discourses, technical infrastructures, and organizational routines, new power configurations can be created for more efficient problem solving. Non-state actors influencing in such arenas show how flexible, informal cooperation of heterogeneous actors dynamically perpetuates the global order of security law (Rodilles and Sullivan, 2025).

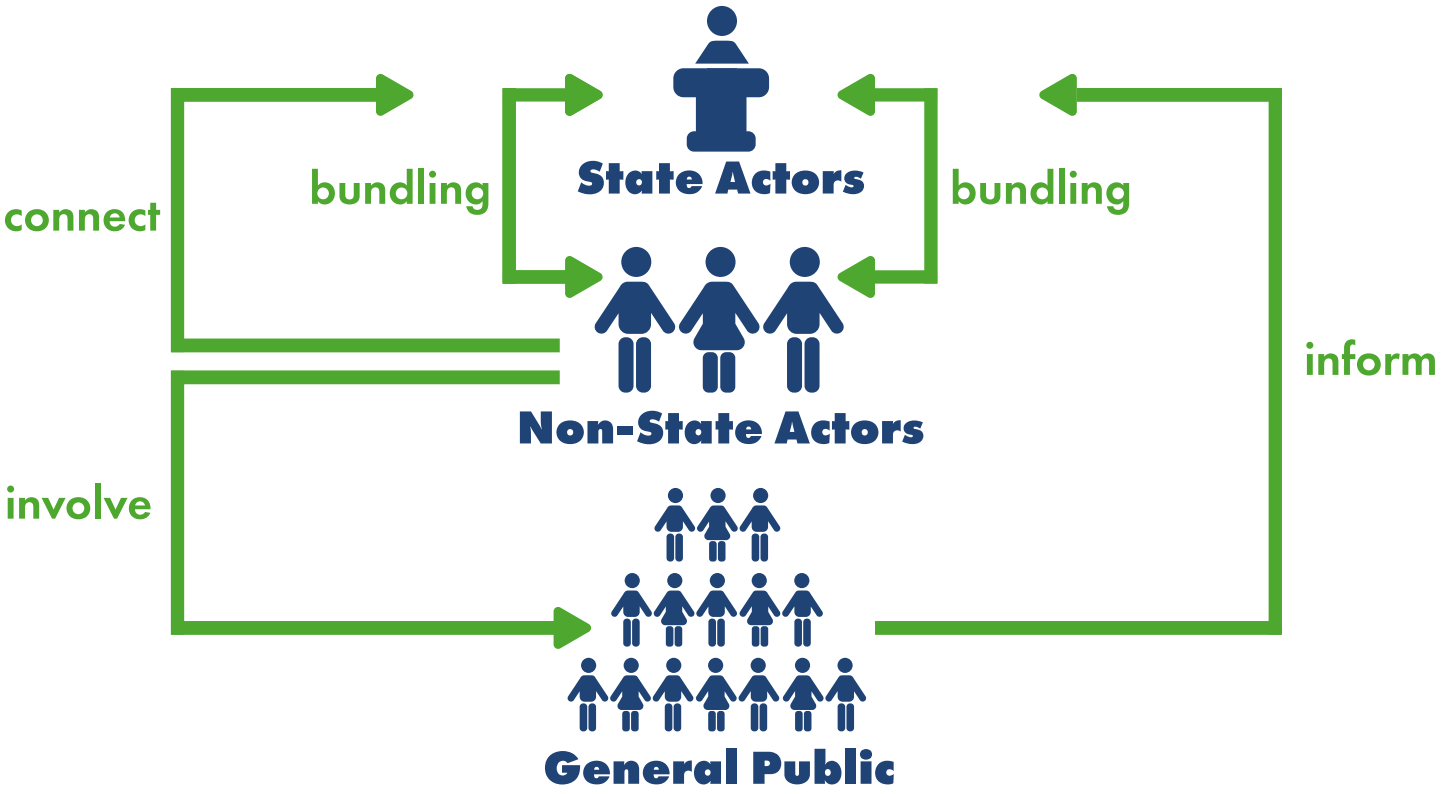

Figure 2: Relationships among assessed actors

3. Conclusion

Post-Westphalian diplomacy enhances global security from an asymmetrical and hierarchical multilateral system (Gleckman, 2016) to decentralized networks of non-state actors, creating opportunities for flexible cooperation. The analysis demonstrates how non-state actors are assuming security policy functions that were traditionally reserved for states and illustrates how Track Two Diplomacy and certain non-state security actors are establishing a flexible form of diplomacy as a complement to state-centered foreign policy. While the transformation from global security policy being an issue of government to being a governance issue can be seen as positive, some concerns remain. The fragmentation of the security architecture into several parallel-operating networks of state and private alliances makes it more difficult for coherent strategy development to emerge. But learning from the analysis of various cases of non-state actors as informal negotiators, especially in Track Two Diplomacy (Kaye, 2007), many initiatives may fail. This concerns the actors' role as part of networks and as negotiators, as well as platform providers. Therefore, having several channels that involve non-state actors, or that are solely made up of non-state-actors trying to achieve progress in diplomatic negotiations is often the only chance of achieving at least one successful outcome. Therefore, the shift towards post-Westphalian network structures is inevitable. Non-state actors not only enrich traditional forums in security policy, but sometimes they also fill gaps where governmental capacity is blocked or ineffective. This pluralization of actors also increases adaptability and opens channels for trust-building and technical cooperation that are very much needed in contemporary security policy.

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About the Article

Main Question: How has the Non-Aligned Movement evolved from Cold War neutrality to a tool for Global South influence? Argument: NAM now engages strategically in economic, technological, and security cooperation, leveraging BRICS+ and South-South partnerships. Conclusion: The Movement remains relevant as a pragmatic platform for collective autonomy, adapting to multipolarity despite internal and external challenges.

About the Author

Sacha Sikòra is a French student and army reservist. Interested in politics, administration and defence, he joined EPIS to improve his knowledge and broaden his perspective to better understand current world.

1. Introduction

Bandung, Indonesia, 24 April 1955. As the last representatives of the countries attending the Asian-African Conference leave their seats, a new world order emerges - The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). This was affirmed a second time when the movement was officially created at the Belgrade Conference in 1961. This rejection of imperialism (both Soviet and American), this desire to develop in parallel with the 'Great Powers' and, more broadly, the creation of cooperation in the 'economic South' (Willy Brandt, 1980, North-South: A Programme for Survival) were the result of these countries' desire to become alternative players in a bipolar world. However, since then, the bipolar world of the Cold War has gradually changed into a multipolar world, in which the order of the blocs has been permanently blurred. The Non-Aligned Movement has also evolved : technological progress and the emergence of regional economic engines, still independent, particularly through the BRICS, stand as evidence of this transformation. How has the Non-Aligned Movement, born out of a desire to reject blocs, been transformed into a strategic instrument of the Global South, exacerbating rivalries in a multipolar world, and to what extent is this evolution being reinforced in global governance?

2. Historical background : how to escape the game of (super)powers ?

In 1945, with the colonial powers exhausted by the Second World War, many colonies revolted or unilaterally declared their independence. This was the case, for example, in Indonesia and French Indochina in Asia, and Egypt and Algeria in Africa. The decolonisation of these countries, which resisted their former masters, attracted other countries seeking recognition. India and Pakistan, also newcomers to the international scene, began to sign agreements with the People's Republic of China, which had won the Chinese Civil War (1927-1950). This was evidenced by the Panchsheel Agreement (literally: Five Principles) in 1953, the first bilateral agreement between China and India. Among other things, this historic agreement recognised the annexation of Tibet, deemed illegal by the West, and proclaimed the principles of peaceful coexistence that would become the foundation of future non-alignment: respect for sovereignty, equality, non-interference and the rejection of the use of force, following the terms of the Panchsheel Agreement, 1954.

2.1 A formal evolution

The conferences in Bandung (1955), Brioni (1956) and Belgrade (1961) would enshrine the movement. Bandung, bringing together 29 countries from Asia and Africa, established an ideological framework: rejection of colonial domination, refusal to enter into military alliances with blocs, and solidarity between recently independent countries. In Brioni, like the Allies in Yalta, Josip Broz Tito (Yugoslavia), Gamal Abdel Nasser (Egypt) and Jawaharlal Nehru (India) formalised this project and became the figureheads of a movement that sought to be the 'third way' between East and West. The Belgrade conference marked the true founding act: 25 countries participated, affirming their desire to preserve strategic autonomy and create their own diplomatic space. Far from being a simple forum, the movement was structured around regular summits that sought to transform neutrality into collective strength. Tito summed up the idea by describing the conference as opposition to the exclusivity of blocs, which are a danger to world peace. From then on, the members of the movement met at congresses, as evidenced by the Fourth Conference of Heads of State and Government of Non-Aligned Countries in Algiers (1973). The 75 countries and organisations present to the summit agreed to focus on economic development rather than seeking international recognition. This shift in the movement's original logic illustrates a strategic repositioning : political independence cannot be guaranteed without true economic independence. However, the end of the Cold War weakened the movement's cohesion: the disappearance of the Soviet bloc, the break-up of Yugoslavia and diplom-

Figure 1: Noema Magazine, From Bandung To BRICS+

atic realignments - such as Egypt's rapprochement with the United States and Indonesia's distancing itself from the anti-revolutionary East Asian blow - weakened the fundamental unity of the non-aligned countries. No longer proceeding as a coherent group within the UN, they lost influence within international politics (Jürgen Dinkel, The Non-Aligned Movement: Genesis, Organization and Politics, 1992 (Brill, 2018), p. 233. Strategic dispersion and the diversity of national interests reduced its influence on major global policy directions. But although the movement appeared marginalised in the 1990s, its institutional existence and ideological heritage remained, paving the way for renewed interest in a multipolar world undergoing restructuring.

3. The non-aligned movement nowadays

Having emerged in the context of decolonisation and the Cold War, the Non-Aligned Movement had to broaden its scope of action to adapt to a constantly changing international environment. From the 1970s onwards, successive summits reflected this desire: Algiers in 1973, Havana in 1979, Kuala Lumpur in 2003 and Baku in 2019 each marked a step in the redefinition of priorities. Non-alignment is no longer just military neutrality in the face of blocs, but an active principle that must be reflected in the global economy, international security, technological cooperation and climate issues. This shift, initiated by calls for a New International Economic Order (UNGA resolution 3201, 1974), reflects the conviction that political independence only makes sense if it is accompanied by economic, scientific and environmental autonomy, UNGA Resolution 3201 and UNGA Resolution 79/215.

3.1 The diversification of specialisation

Indeed, the fundamental lines of the movement have evolved since its founding. Many members, trying to avoid the use of the dollar system, tried turning themselves as economic powerhouses. As early as the 1970s, NAM members were calling for a New International Economic Order (resolution 3201 adopted by the UN General Assembly in May 1974), denouncing the unequal nature of world trade and the dominance of the Bretton Woods institutions. But it was at the turn of the 21st century that this demand took shape in new platforms - the rapprochement with the BRICS countries is the most visible manifestation of this. The creation of this coalition in 2009,

followed by its expansion in 2023 (BRICS+: integration of Egypt, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates and Argentina) offers Southern countries a credible alternative to the IMF and the World Bank. India and South Africa, both members of the NAM, are at the heart of this trade diversification strategy, which aims to reduce dependence on the dollar and promote the use of local currencies in international trade. Members of NAM also aimed to create monetary unions : this is the case of a few Western African countries (Burkina Faso, Senegal, Mali) that try to emancipate from the XFA (Franc CFA), minted by France, and to create the ECO - a common monetary unit between the ECOWAS.

3.1.1 Security

Security is another area where non-aligned states have found their place, not by creating a military alliance, but by becoming a pillar of UN peacekeeping. As early as the United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC, 1960-1964), India, Ethiopia and Yugoslavia had demonstrated the Movement's capacity for intervention. Since then, countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Ghana and Indonesia have been among the main contributors of peacekeeping, being for instance non-permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (United Nations, Security Council website), confirming the stabilising role of non-alignment in regional conflicts. At the same time, these states favour bilateral partnerships outside of alliances: Algeria is modernising its armed forces through ad hoc agreements with Moscow and Paris, Indonesia is purchasing fighter jets from both the United States and Russia, while India is equipping itself with Russian aircrafts from Mikoyan Gurevich or Sukhoi) and French ones (Dassault Rafale) while developing joint exercises with the United States since the 2000s (Malabar Exercises). This stance of many non-aligned countries testifies not only a will to strategic auto determination, but also is an application of the Art of War principle - He who can remain calm and composed while waiting for a disordered enemy will be victorious. (Sun Tzu, 5th century B.C.)

Non-Aligned Movement (NAM):
A coalition of states advocating independence from dominant power blocs, promoting South-South cooperation and collective autonomy in global affairs

3.1.2 Technology

Technology has become a new framework for South-South cooperation. Countries considered as members of the Economic South - contra Willy Brandt's report - tend to work more together, in contrast to the previous situation in which those countries were more dependent on the Economic North. The Kuala Lumpur Conference (2003) emphasised the need to 'bridge the digital divide' (World Summit on the Information Society, 2003) between North and South, paving the way for more structured technological diplomacy. The IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa) forum, created in the same year, launched projects in telecommunications, health and renewable energy. The New Development Bank of the BRICS countries (2014) now finances digital and energy infrastructure in Africa, Asia and Latin America. India has developed satellite programmes with African partners - programmating some investments on the African Union's Space agenda 2063 (following the official African Union's website), and partners, for instance, the SatCom association in India (SatCom India Association official report) This particular association dresses a report on what are the cooperation fields between African partners and the Satellite and Communication ecosystem in India. Brazil has also engaged in cooperation on biotechnology and solar energy. This commitment reflects a strategic shift: non-alignment is not limited to defense or politics. Nowadays, the movement dedicates more and more to global issues, even beyond a certain political interest; still, this intervention of such outsiders is a clear stance to cut the grass under the foot of superpowers and to impose themselves as emerging actors. Venezuela, for instance, chose to abandon Israeli's assault rifles production to shift towards a Venezuelan production: Maduro's decision is, all political opinion excluded, also a move to show that non-aligned countries can valorise their know-how, espe-

cially in the field of defense; this know-how is also exported in more complex projects, such as the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor. This project aims to develop nuclear fusion as a renewable and clean source of almost infinite energy based in France, with China and India as the important members of the project.

3.1.3 Intervention on the ecological issue

Climate and food security have also become a cross-cutting theme for the Movement. Since the Havana Conference (1979), Southern countries have emphasised environmental injustice. The principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities', enshrined in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992), was defended by non-aligned countries as a guarantee of fairness. In Copenhagen (2009) and Paris (2015), the G77+China – most of whose members are from the NAM – formed a bloc demanding massive funding for adaptation. In terms of food, the 2007-2008 crisis was a wake-up call: India, Thailand and Vietnam, major rice exporters, put regulatory mechanisms in place, while several African countries strengthened their regional cooperation to secure supplies. Brazil, since the beginning of the Luiz Ignacio da Lula Silva term, tends to limit the impact of deforestation (Le Monde, 10 August 2023). These dynamics illustrate the transformation of non-alignment: from a defensive stance against blocs, it has become an instrument of collective mobilisation in the face of global challenges. In the ITER project (International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor), India and China joined the project to develop nuclear fusion, in order to create the strongest possible energy source on Earth, which would also accelerate the development of green energy, following the organisation's words.

> **"The Non-Aligned Movement has evolved from Cold War neutrality to a strategic platform enabling the Global South to assert autonomy and influence in a multipolar world"**

3.2 Old players and new members towards an emerging movement

The Non-Aligned Movement was structured around historical actors who shaped its doctrine. India, a founding pillar, embodies continuity: Nehru laid the foundations for the 'five principles policy' (Panchsheel) as early as 1947, which is still invoked today in Indian diplomacy. Its contemporary strategy is one of multi-alignment, combining membership of the BRICS and rapprochement with Washington within the framework of the Quad (United States, Japan, Australia, India). Egypt, under Nasser, was at the heart of the initial project, but its gradual alignment with Washington after the Camp David Accords (1978) weakened its role within the NAM, even though it retained institutional weight. Indonesia, host of Bandung in 1955, remains active through ASEAN and regional initiatives. South Africa, which joined the Movement after the end of apartheid (1994), illustrates the NAM's capacity for renewal and is now a key player on the African continent. New partners are gravitating around this core. Mexico, a regular observer, maintains a diplomatic tradition of independence (Doctrina Estrada of 1930) and participates in NAM discussions despite its membership in the United States Mexico and Canada Agreements (USMCA). The United Arab Emirates, host of the 2011 Dubai summit, embodies a hybrid diplomacy: as military allies of Washington, they invest heavily in South-South energy and logistics cooperation networks. Vietnam, an active member since the end of the war (1975), has developed a policy of 'dynamic balance', multiplying partnerships with the United States, China and Russia, while maintaining a non-aligned identity in multilateral forums. These trajectories reflect new diplomatic strategies. India embodies multi-alignment, participating simultaneously in the BRICS, the Quad

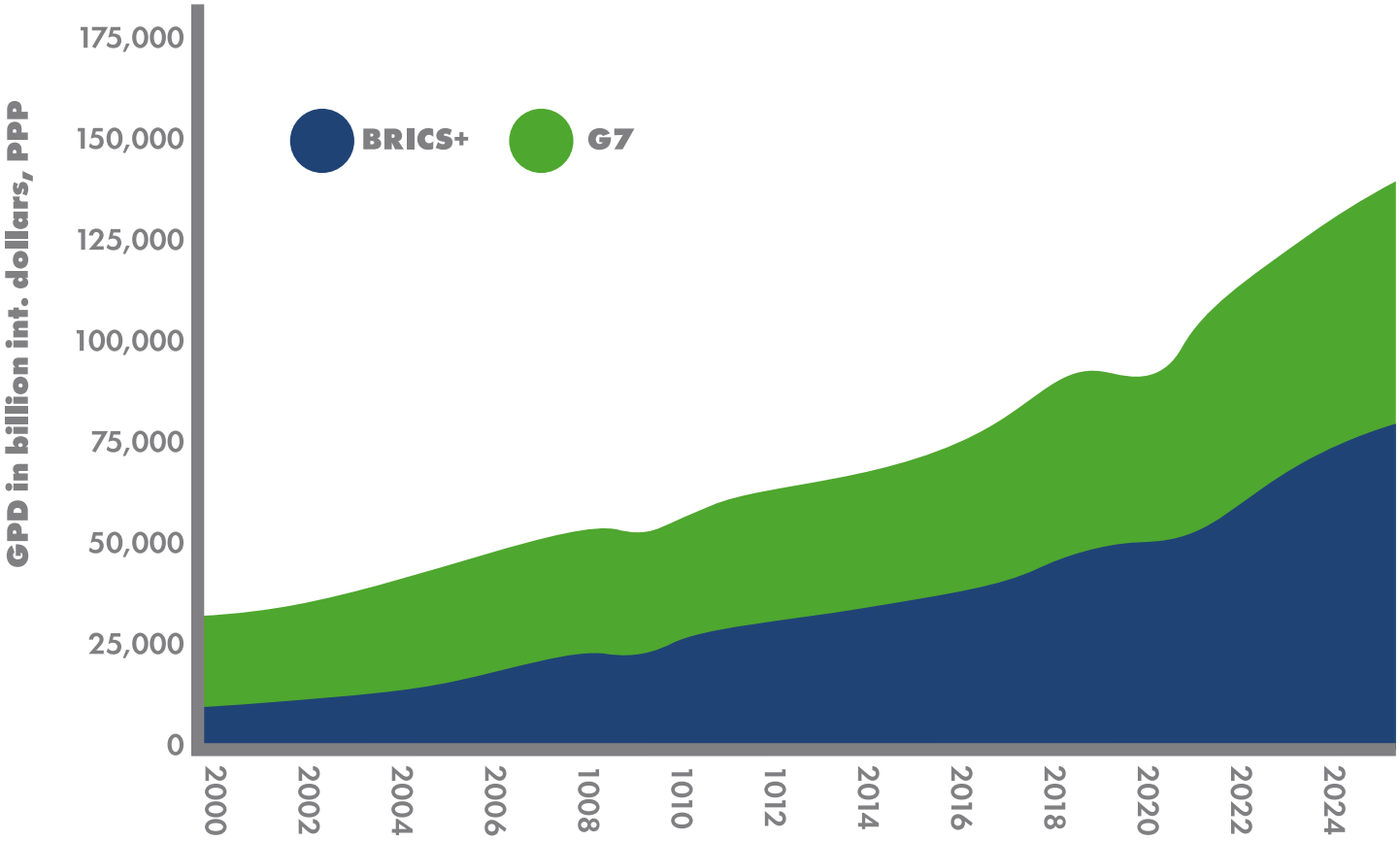

Figure 2: Combined gross domestic product (GDP) in purchasing power parity (PPP) of the BRICS Plus and G7 countries from 2000 to 2025, – Source: Statista. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1412418/gdp-development-g7-brics/?srsltid=AfmBOorXB6-ejO4RLivYM-7MYFRv9eOv-MLPqDn_K96N1ozW2mKCyF9QS

and the NAM summits. Thematic coalitions, such as the G77 (created in 1964 and now comprising more than 130 countries), offer a structured extension of the NAM's demands on development and climate. Finally, transactional diplomacy, practised by states such as Indonesia and the Emirates, illustrates a pragmatic non-alignment, where alliances are chosen according to immediate and sectoral interests. Today's NAM is no longer a position of withdrawal: it has become a toolbox enabling states to deal with a multipolar international system.

4. New and old limits of the Movement

The Non-Aligned Movement faces several structural challenges that limit its ability to exert influence. The first is external: pressure from the major powers. Since the Cold War, Washington and Moscow have tried to seduce or coerce non-aligned countries; today, this logic is being replayed between the United States and China. African countries heavily indebted to Beijing (for example, under the 'New Silk Roads' initiative since 2013) see their diplomatic autonomy threatened. Similarly, dependence on development aid from the European Union sometimes limits the room for manoeuvre of countries in the Sahel and Central Africa.

4.1 Internal boundaries

The second challenge is internal: regional rivalries are fragmenting the Movement. India and Pakistan, both founding members, have fought three wars (1947-1949, 1965, 1971) and continue to oppose each other over Kashmir, preventing any common position on South Asia. In North Africa, Algeria and Morocco, both pillars of the NAM, are opposing the issue of Western Sahara, paralyzing regional dynamics. In Southeast Asia, the Sino-Vietnamese rivalry of the 1970s and 1980s also weakened cohesion. These antagonisms undermine the NAM's ability to speak with one voice, emphasising the still predominant role of the global superpowers. For instance, the incapacity of act in the conflict between Cambodia and Thailand was a stinging defeat of the NAM in front of the United States of America.

4.2 Institutional changes

The third challenge is institutional. With more than 120 members, the Movement risks weakening its identity. Its summits, such as the one in Kampala in 2024, adopt ambitious declarations but rarely follow through on them. Unlike ASEAN or the African Union, the NAM has no binding coordination mechanism. The will of the countries to stop reuniting themselves in big events such as the Alger Conference faded away. This organizational weakness often confines it to a symbolic role. The risk is therefore marginalization: faced with tighter and more effective forums such as the G20, BRICS or the African Union, the NAM struggles to exist as an operational player. This failure to adapt to new configurations could relegate it to the status of a diplomatic relic, a mere vestige of the Cold War. The evolution of BRICS+ is also a mark, maybe a will of old members, to go further than this first attempt, and to overcome the future challenge differently, seeing the problems of the institution.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Non-Aligned Movement has evolved from a doctrine of principled detachment into a measured instrument of influence within the shifting geometry of global power. Its original aspiration—to remain outside the rivalries of dominant blocs—has gradually given way to a form of selective engagement, through which the Global South seeks both autonomy and recognition. While the Movement no longer embodies the moral idealism of its founders, it continues to serve as a platform for articulating collective interests and contesting asymmetries in global governance. This evolution is neither a betrayal nor a triumph, but rather an adaptation: non-alignment transformed into strategic participation. In an era of resurgent multipolarity, the NAM's relevance endures—not as a passive legacy of the past, but as a cautious, pragmatic voice navigating the tensions of an unsettled world order.

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About the Article

Main Question: Can the EU's Global Gateway be a viable alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative? Argument: While the BRI dominates global infrastructure diplomacy, the EU's Global Gateway leverages sustainability, grants, and governance standards to compete. Conclusion: The Gateway has potential but faces promotion, differentiation, and internal cohesion challenges to rival the BRI effectively.

About the Author

Mihai Postelnicu is a recent graduate of European Studies. He is passionate about international relations and diplomacy, with a focus on the Middle East and Europe regions. Topics of interest include NATO security on the eastern flank and more.

1. Introduction

Global Infrastructure development has become an essential element of diplomacy for several different countries in the 21st century. One such country is the People's Republic of China. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, is a Chinese infrastructure finance model that had as its starting aim to link the far East with the European Continent (McBride et al., 2023), recreating the ancient Silk Road route (Casarini, 2024). Since its inception, the initiative has expanded to include South America, Oceania and Africa. Currently, out of 193 United Nations member states, 154 have participated in the BRI so far, totaling 80% of all the members (Tiezzi, 2023). This dominance puts the Belt and Road initiative at the forefront of infrastructure diplomacy. However, as is with dominance, it is not permanent. The Global Gateway is the European Union's response to the BRI. Launched in 2021, the project aims to raise around €300 billion by 2027, in a bid to create "sustainable and trusted connections" with the EU's global partners (Casarini, 2024, p. 9). One of the newest pawns on the chessboard of infrastructure diplomacy, the task ahead is challenging, if the Global Gateway wants to succeed. As such, the following article will aim to answer the following question: Can the EU's Global Gateway be used as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative? The article aims to explore if the EU's Global Gateway is a viable alternative to the BRI that states can utilize. The BRI's history will be briefly discussed, as well as the Global Gateway's. Furthermore, the security concerns, economic implications, infrastructure and influence in the region that are raised by the BRI will be explored. As such, a contrast between Europe's very own "Global Gateway" and the BRI will be created, with the goal of looking at possibilities for how the Global Gateway can compete against the leading infrastructure diplomacy project.

Infrastructure Diplomacy:
Using large-scale infrastructure projects to build influence, economic ties, and strategic partnerships beyond traditional diplomacy

2. The Belt and Road Initiative: The Silk Road of the 21st century

The Belt and Road Initiative traces its origins back to 2013, when President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping, announced the country's entrance into the world of infrastructure diplomacy. Infrastructure diplomacy will be defined by Al-Rikabi, who states it is diplomacy that "leverages critical technological systems to create durable relationships based on computational interdependence" that goes beyond "traditional or economic diplomacy" (2025, para.2). The BRI is also known as the "One Belt, One Road" Initiative (Karjalainen, 2022, p.4), a nod to the initiative's attempts at recreating the Silk Road, a historic series of trade routes which connected the European continent with the far east regions of China. The Silk Road allowed for valuable goods such as silk to reach Europe, enriching both sides of the route. Similarly to the original Silk Road, the BRI brings with it economic advantages, to both the countries using it and to Beijing, only this time, it consists of infrastructure and construction investments. They include "railways, energy pipelines, highways, and streamlined border crossings" as well as "industrial areas designed to create jobs", such as Huawei's 5G infrastructure (McBride et al., 2023, para.7). The benefits and results are clear. According to Wang (2025), the first months of 2025 saw the most amount of engagement for a six-month period, with over $66 billion in construction contracts and over $57 billion in investments. Furthermore, since 2013, engagement with the Belt and Road Initiative has reached over $1.3 trillion.

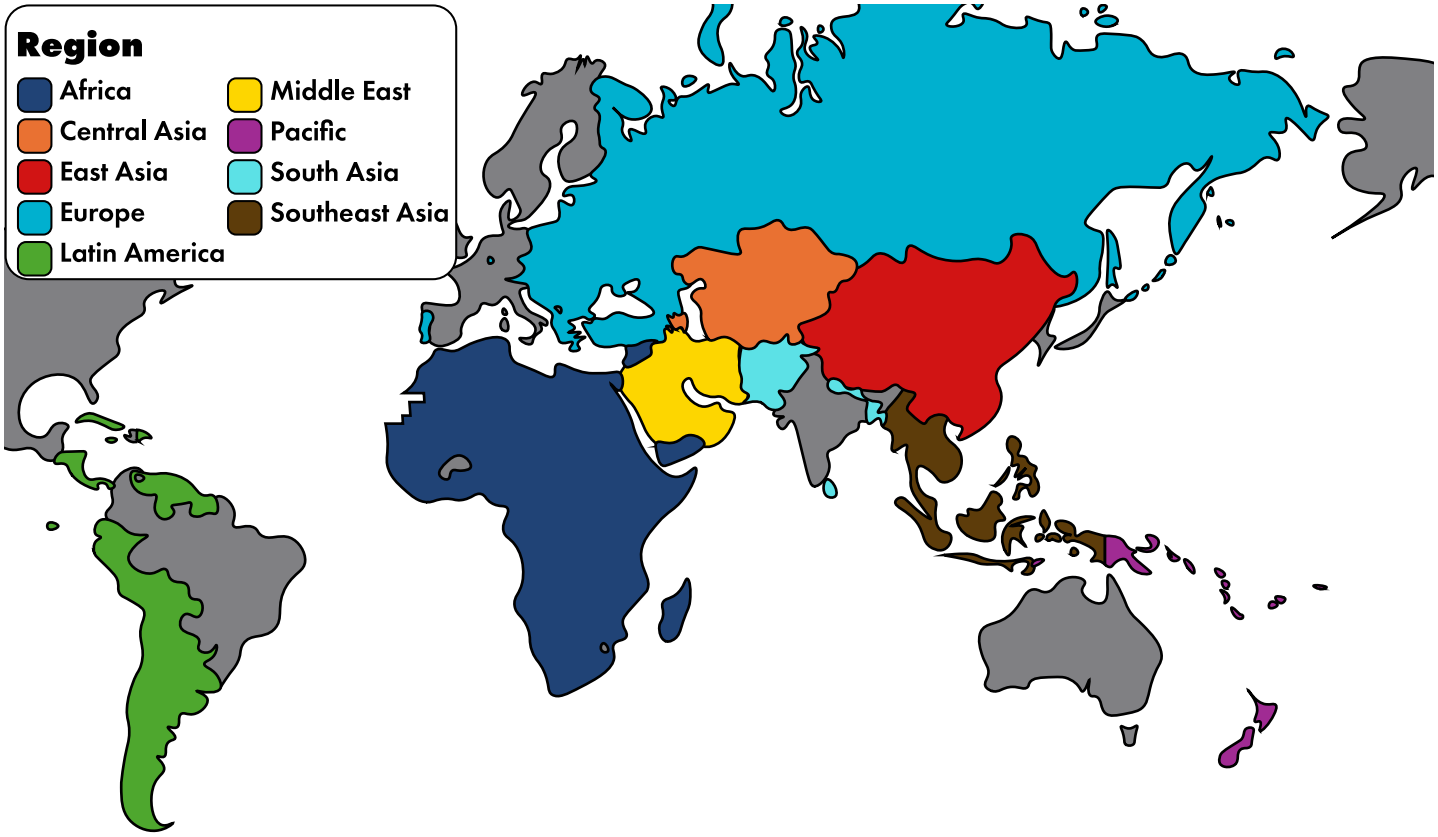

Figure 1: Map of Belt and Road Initiative BRI countries by region. Credit: Green Finance and Development Center. – Source: https://greenfdc.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-investment-report-2025-h1/?cookie-state-change=1760382562937

3. China: reliable partner or not?

Beijing's venture into infrastructure diplomacy, both from an influence and economic perspective, could be considered a resounding success. Nonetheless, there have been growing concerns regarding the Belt and Road Initiative (Vermorken, 2024). The initiative has been plagued by scandals regarding "corruption, waste, debt distress, and failing projects" (Dezenski, 2024, para.3), concerns further mentioned by Casarini (p.7-9). Notable examples include rail projects in Djibouti and Ethiopia, where billions of dollars in losses were reported, and the Jakarta-Bandung high speed trail line, which will require double the amount of time predicted initially to break even (Dezenski & Birenbaum, 2024). Further projects in Sri Lanka and Kazakhstan were plagued by inefficiency from corruption (Huang, 2023), resulting in a negative image for the BRI. Another criticism that Beijing has received regarding the Belt and Road Initiative revolves around so-called "debt-trap", a phenomenon particularly associated with the BRI (Himmer & Rod, 2022). Himmer and Rod use Brahma Chellaney's coin-defining definition, who, in summary, defines debt-trap as the situation when a country ("state X") takes out excessive loans from another country (in this case China), resulting in "state X" becoming financially dependent to China, being unable to pay out the initial loans (2022). This, in turn, can "exacerbate economic vulnerabilities". (Vermorken, 2024, para. 38). Nonetheless, despite the growing concerns regarding China, the Belt and Road Initiative remains an attractive offering, with significant investments across Europe, particularly in the east (Casarini, 2024). One of the beneficiaries has been Viktor Orban's Hungary, which was the first European country to sign a BRI agreement with China in 2013. In 2023, Budapest has attracted investments of around $8 billion from the BRI, a significant percentage from their total direct investment sum of around $14 billion (Xinhua News Agency, 2024). Further notable investments include the biggest Huawei logistics and manufacturing outside of China, the construction of BYD's first EV factory in Europe (Euractiv, 2024) and the construction of the new Budapest-Belgrade railway (Xinhua News Agency,

2024). This has led to concerns from Hungary's partners, particularly around security. The Biden Administration has labeled the Chinese EVs as national security threats (Kiszelly, 2025), while others believe that the European Market will suffer due to Chinese manipulations, as a result of product dumping through the Hungarian Market (Dezenski, 2024).

4. Europe's Global Gateway: The EU strikes back

All things considered, the Belt and Road Initiative has not gone unnoticed. As a result of growing Chinese influence across the globe, both through the BRI and through other mechanisms, the European Union has acknowledged the need for a solution that would compete against the BRI. As such, in 2022, Ursula von der Leyen announced the Global Gateway, a "connectivity strategy" aimed at creating "links and not dependencies" (Grieger, 2021, p.9). The goal of the program is to raise over €300 billion that would be invested in digitalization, energy and transport, with an emphasis on sustainability (Garcia-Herrero, 2024). The above-mentioned goal was recently fulfilled, as announced by Ursula von der Leyen at the most recent Global Gateway Forum in October 2025 (European Commission, 2025a). While the EU has promoted the Global Gateway as an alternative to the BRI, it has not escaped criticism itself. It has been criticized for lacking "explicit funding and has so far fallen short of bundling European external investment, infrastructure projects, private investment and financial instruments into a coherent platform" (Gehrke, 2020, p.242). Furthermore, confusion as to the Gateway's objectives and implementation strategies remain (Garcia-Herrero, 2024). Karjalainen (2022) further mentions that the programme has not generated credibility as a challenger to the BRI, an essential element if the EU wants the Global Gateway to dethrone the king of infrastructure diplomacy.

> **"The EU's Global Gateway seeks to counter China's BRI by offering sustainable, transparent infrastructure investments as an alternative in strategic regions"**

5. What the Global Gateway must achieve

The Global Gateway is not the first infrastructure diplomacy project that aims to compete against the Belt and Road Initiative, with notable examples including Japan's Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (Nishitateno & Todo, 2025) and the USA's Build Back Better World (Karjalainen, 2022). In comparison, so far, the Global Gateway has not generated the same level of interest and engagement as the Belt and Road Initiative (Garcia-Herrero, 2024). This can be attributed partly to a lack of promotion from the EU itself, which has very few publications about the project online (Portal, 2023b). This has resulted in a lack of knowledge in areas where the Global Gateway is intended to be used, such as Africa, according to Emmanuel Matambo (Portal, 2023b). If the Global Gateway wants to compete against the BRI, it must promote itself more efficiently, especially in areas where it wants to compete with Beijing. Secondly, the Global Gateway must differentiate itself from the BRI in the elements the BRI has had controversies. What the EU has done well is comparing the Global Gateway with the BRI, with the European Commission labeling the investments as "sustainable and high quality" with "lasting benefits" for local economies (2023b). Furthermore, the six core values the EU presents for the Global Gateway, such as "democratic values", "good governance" and "security" can be seen as opposites of what China's BRI is typically associated with. In addition, over "half of the project suggestions are in sub-Saharan Africa", an area targeted by the BRI as well (Portal, 2023a, para.6). All of this is in response to the controversies surrounding the BRI and is aimed at presenting the Global Gateway as a suitable alternative in comparison. A focus on the "debt-trap" issues would also help the Global Gateway, particularly to differentiate the two in regard to their functioning. The BRI functions primarily on loans, whereas the Global Gateway will also

provide direct investments and grants (Karjalainen, 2022), an element that can significantly attract potential partners for the Gateway. Thirdly, the EU must resolve its internal struggles with Hungary if it wants to succeed in promoting the Global Gateway. The image of an EU member-state using the BRI in such a significant way is certainly not flattering, and this could result in a deterioration of the EU's aptitude to leading an investment project, since countries such as Hungary are opting to look further east instead of west. While Hungary is not the only EU member-state to use the BRI, it is the one that has leaned into it the most. This will prove to be a difficult task to solve, at least until the next elections in the country, as Viktor Orban seems committed to China as a partner for the foreseeable future.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Global Gateway holds significant promise as a strategic counterweight to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a sentiment widely shared by specialized analysts. However, its effectiveness is currently hampered by critical deficiencies that must be addressed to ensure its long-term viability and competitive edge. The (silk) road ahead is challenging, requiring immediate, focused improvements in three key areas:

- Promotion and clarity regarding the Global Gateway
- Better positioning regarding the BRI with a focus on key difference areas
- Solving internal investment problems for the EU regarding countries such as Hungary.

The Global Gateway has potential, and competitiveness with China is possible, but the Belt and Road Initiative has had an 8-year head-start. In the current environment, the above-mentioned points may act as introductory points that the Global Gateway can improve upon to better ensure their effectiveness at competing with the BRI. Nonetheless, the global diplomatic landscape is shifting constantly and with it come newer challenges, both for the Global Gateway and for the Belt and Road Initiative....

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About the Article

Main Question: How urgent is the EU-India partnership and trade deal for both sides? Argument: With U.S. tariffs and China's assertiveness, the EU and India must strengthen trade, investment, and strategic ties. Conclusion: A comprehensive FTA would enhance economic cooperation, strategic alignment, and global influence, but challenges remain in regulatory and sectoral alignment.

About the Author

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1. Introduction

The urgency of the EU-India partnership and trade deal is amplified by the effects of US tariffs on the global trade environment, effectively straining economic ties with major partners, such as the European Union and India. As a result, both players are looking to deepen their strategic partnerships and strengthen bilateral agreements and ties. Fresh attempts are underway to negotiate a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and the EU, with talks for a Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA) initiated to build stronger ties within their economies. In spite of past obstacles, including differing positions on intellectual property rights, there is a shared duty to cultivate a resilient and mutually beneficial partnership. This collaboration extends to infrastructure development in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. The EU and India are important trading partners to each other. In 2021, the EU was India's second largest trading partner, accounting for trade in goods (European Commission: Directorate-General for Trade and Economic Security & Trade Impact B.V., 2023), and a significant source of investment, a position the Union holds in 2024, according to the latest data from the European Commission (European Commission, 2025). In addition, India has been rising in the ranks when it comes to the most important trade partners (in goods) of the EU, holding the 9th position at the end of 2024. However, on the other hand, India remains cautious about the EU's strategic orientation towards China, fearing it does not align with its national interests, making it essential to reach a common position in a renewed partnership (European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2024). The imperative for strengthening EU-India relations is obvious, especially in navigating post-pandemic realities, fostering a resilient partnership and seizing emerging opportunities.

	(1)	(2) Export	(3) Import	(4) Total	(5) % Total EU Trade
1	China	293.6	661.7	955.3	18.5
2	US	429.7	325.1	764.8	14.8
3	UK	245.3	120.4	371.7	7.2
4	Switzerland	216.6	154.4	371.0	7.2
5	Russia	102.3	195.6	298.0	5.8
6	Turkex	92.0	105.2	197.3	3.8
7	Norway	66.7	105.1	171.8	3.3
8	Japan	72.9	87.8	160.6	3.1
9	South Korea	63.7	72.5	136.2	2.6
10	India	49.8	65.1	114.9	2.2

Table 1: EU's most important non EU trading partners in 2021 in goods (EUR billion) – Source: European Commission (European Commission: Directorate-General for Trade and Economic Security & Trade Impact B.V. (2023). Trade sustainability impact assessment (SIA) in support of free trade agreement and investment protection agreement negotiations between the European Union and the republic of India : final report : annex (including baselines). Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2781/133860.

Total Trade in goofs with world (billion EUR %)

	Value in billion EUR					Compound annual growth rate			World Share	World ranking
Repoprter	2014	2019	2022	2023	2024	2014-2024	2019-2024	2023-2024	2024	2024
World	23,544	27,973	39,280	35,952	37,029	4.6%	5.8%	3.0%	100.0%	
EU27	3,387	4,028	5,495	5,013	4,949	3.9%	4.2%	-1.3%	13.4%	2
Australia	363	446	683	613	594	5.0%	5.9%	-3.1%	1.6%	16
Brazil	351	366	592	550	568	4.9%	9.2%	3.3%	1.5%	18
Canada	726	827	2,238	1,071	1,069	3.9%	5.3%	-0.2%	2.9%	10
China	3,241	4,080	6,002	5,536	5,698	5.8%	6.9%	2,9%	15.4%	1
Hong Kon	767	996	1,216	1,139	1,238	4.9%	4.4%	8.6%	3.3%	5
India	586	719	1,126	1,016	1,072	6.2%	8.3%	5.5%	2.9%	9
Japan	1,131	1,274	1,561	1,390	1,340	1.7%	1.9%	-3.6%	3.6%	4
Malaysia	334	396	615	536	584	5.8%	8.1%	8.9%	1.6%	17
Mexico	618	842	1,157	1,135	1,183	5.7%	7.0%	4.2%	3.2%	7
Russia	491	592	781	661	619	0.5%	0.9%	-6.3%	1.7%	15
Singapore	584	570	942	832	891	4.3%	5.9%	7.1%	2.4%	11
South Korea	827	934	1,344	1,179	1,215	3.9%	5.4%	3.1%	3.3%	6
Switzerland	441	527	720	725	753	5.5%	7.4%	3.8%	2.0%	13
Thailand	341	433	556	528	561	5.1%	5.4%	6.4%	1.5%	19
Türkiye	314	349	587	571	560	5.9%	9.9%	-2.0%	1.5%	20
United Arab Em.	347	438	713	731	804	8.8%	12.9%	10.0%	2.2%	12
United Kingdom	899	1,147	1,248	1,119	1,106	2.1%	-0.7%	-1.1%	3.0%	8
United States	2,986	3,696	5,041	4,720	4,927	5.1%	5.9%	4.4%	13.3%	3
Vietnam	219	454	679	614	700	12.3%	9.0%	14.1%	1.9%	14

Table 2: EU's most important non EU trading partners in 2024 in goods (EUR billion) – Source: European Commission (European Commission: Directorate-General for Trade and Economic Security. (2025). DG Trade statistical guide: August 2025. Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2781/0201883.

2. Europe between two giants

The European Commission's Political Guidelines, from July 2024 (European Union Institute for Security Studies, Rühlig, & Teer, 2025) indicates the construction of a new foreign economic policy at the core of its vital and strategic agenda. This enterprise has gained additional urgency because of the major shifts in global trade, with the prime example in the new Donald Trump's administration America First agenda, whose main focus is placed on reindustrialisation, seeking to bring manufacturing back to the United States, rebuild domestic industry and reshore key supply chains. Such policy could provoke even more EU companies to relocate production to the U.S., escalating economic pressure on Europe. At the same time, the near closure of the U.S. market to Chinese exports, especially in sectors like electrical machinery and components, could worsen China's long-standing industrial overcapacity, flooding global markets with subsidised goods. This twofold pressure forges a difficult challenge for the EU, which must now handle simultaneously the risks from both China and the United States and balance priorities: the EU risks deeply to focus on the new American tariffs obstacles while forsaking ongoing structural issues, mainly as the Chinese overcapacity and strategic dependencies. But the issue extends beyond economics. Europe's security architecture depends on complex international industrial cooperation, especially in defence production and telecommunications. Disruptions in these areas could severely weaken Europe's security and deterrence. Trump 2.0's challenge to global trade magnifies existing threats to the EU's competitiveness, sovereignty, and crisis resilience. Nonetheless, other players are also under fire from U.S. policies, which opens a strategic window: the EU can

place itself as a stable and attractive partner, offering an alternative to both U.S. unpredictability and China's self-reliant model. To seize this opportunity, the EU's new Foreign Economic Policy - still largely unknown - must integrate three key pillars: economic security; trade policy; and investment partnerships (European Parliament: Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services & Sheil, 2025). Bringing these strands together offers a chance to address both long-standing and emerging geopolitical challenges and to build stronger and more resilient global partnerships. In this framework, India presents as an alternative to address an urgent need, in order to counter the current geopolitical and geoeconomic environments that the EU faces. However, there are many obstacles needed to be surpassed if both players want to reach a new FTA and renewed partnership.

EU-India Strategic Partnership:
Bilateral cooperation combining trade, investment, infrastructure, and strategic alignment to enhance resilience and global influence

3. Framework of EU-India relations

The relationship between the European Union (EU) and India has evolved significantly over the past six decades, marked by key milestones that reflect the depth and diversity of their partnership. Beginning with the creation of diplomatic ties between India and the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1962, cooperation has steadily expanded across political, economic, and strategic fields. A broader engagement was inaugurated after the EU's formal establishment in 1993, followed by the signing of a Cooperation Agreement in 1994, laying the foundations of the political relationship. This partnership was deepened and strengthened in 2004 with the formal launch of the EU-India Strategic Partnership. In 2005 the EU-India Collaborative and Mutual Action Plan was approved, defining common objectives across political, economic, and development fields. At the 2008 conference, discussions focused on research and technology, sustainable development, peace and security, and the enhancement of cultural and interpersonal ties. New endeavors in order to deepen trade relations began in 2007 with the initiation of negotiations for a Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA). However, despite several negotiation rounds, strong differences remained over market access concerns such as services, agriculture, automobiles, and intellectual property rights. Also the EU's assertiveness on including human rights clauses made progress improbable, causing the EU-India cooperation to remain limited and largely focused on economic and business aspects for nearly a decade, lacking a broader strategic direction (GJRA & Rani, 2025). Between 2007 and 2013, negotiations on the BTIA faced obstacles related to India's business environment and trade policies, leading to a standstill. But, despite the difficulties, in 2021, the EU and India agreed to resume the FTA negotiations. Remarcably, regardless of the challenges introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic, both parties intensified their partnership: at the 15th India-EU Summit in 2020, both endorsed the "India-EU Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025," aimed at intensifying cooperation across global governance, trade, sustainable development, foreign policy, security, and people-to-people exchanges (Saroha, 2025). The following year, the EU unveiled its Indo-Pacific strategy at the 16th India-EU meeting, emphasizing a rules-based regional security framework and alliances with like-minded countries, with India playing a central role and advocating for a free and inclusive Indo-Pacific region, focusing on maritime cooperation and adherence to international law under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), reflecting its commitment to regional stability. In January 2021, India and the EU held their inaugural maritime security talks to enhance collaboration in maritime awareness, capacity building, and joint naval exercises. Building investment links with key regional players like India and ASEAN and strengthening trade relations between Europe and the Indo-Pacific could position Europe as a global superpower in the 21st century. The focus on forming regional coalitions prioritizes mutual cooperation without fostering economic dependence or debt. The EU's Global Gateway initiative, with a

€300 billion investment plan from 2021 to 2027, aims to contribute significantly to global infrastructure development. This program reflects Europe's approach to building strong global connectivity by promoting transparent contracts rather than debt accumulation. Economically, the EU is India's second largest trading partner, with bilateral trade in goods reaching $120 billion in 2024 (European Commission, 2025). Approximately 6,000 EU companies operate in India, supporting over 6 million jobs both directly and indirectly.

4. Global environment and strategic importance of India to the EU: the urgency of a new EU-India partnership and Free Trade Agreement (FTA)

The evolution of India–EU relations in the 21st century is shaped by a convergence of economic ambitions, political goals, and cultural connections. As both partners navigate current global challenges and wish for deeper cooperation, it becomes increasingly clear that their relationship is not merely beneficial, but essential for addressing the complexities of today's international landscape. In this sense, the strategic importance of their partnership underscores the need for sustained dialogue and adaptive collaboration, particularly in a world that is more interconnected than ever before (VERHAELEN, 2024). Economically, the India–EU relationship stands reinvigorated by trade, investment, and technology exchange. The European Union remains one of India's most important commercial partners. As of 2023, bilateral trade between the two exceeded €100 billion, reflecting the strength and depth of their economic engagement. This trade reaches a wide variety of sectors, including machinery, chemicals, textiles, and technology, demonstrating a growing and diversified economic commitment between the two partners. The evolving geopolitical landscape, particularly regarding China, presents both challenges and opportunities for India and the European Union. A critical problem for the EU is its internal divisions and ununified position over China, which must be settled in order to design a unified strategy that aligns, or at least, doesn't cause India's opposition. According to the Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee (2025), as the world's two largest democracies, the EU and India have a unique opportunity to use their common values to reinforce a rules-based, multilateral order, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. The EU-India partnership stands at a pivotal moment, with the potential to bring major strategic and economic benefits. In a post-pandemic world, building resilient and mutually beneficial alliances has become more relevant and urgent than ever. India also emerges as a strategic partner in shaping the EU's Foreign Economic Policy, as it poses an alternative to the negative effects of Trump 2.0's unpredictable trade agenda. To realize this potential, however, the EU must be prepared to: co-develop trust-based security frameworks with partners to enhance physical and economic security; expand and diversify global supply chains in cooperation with European and international partners to build resilience in critical value chains; ensure fair competition by jointly assessing trade practices and market conditions with key partners; align on global standards and norms with like-minded nations to uphold universal democratic values. For these reasons, it becomes evident that reaching a new FTA with India is essential for the EU, in spite of the obstacles being encountered during the negotiations. A comprehensive new FTA between India and the European Union holds significant potential to enhance bilateral economic cooperation. By reducing non-tariff barriers and streamlining market access, such an agreement could pave the way for more efficient trade flows between the two partners. Beyond boosting the volume of bilateral trade, the FTA is also expected to attract greater Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from the EU into India (European Commission, Directorate-General for Trade and Economic Security & Trade Impact B.V.,

> **"The EU-India partnership and upcoming FTA are crucial to counter U.S. tariffs, leverage India's strategic position, and strengthen global trade resilience"**

2023). Both India and the EU stand to benefit from increased investments, particularly in high-growth sectors such as renewable energy, digital technologies, and advanced manufacturing. Cooperation in these areas could foster innovation, enhance competitiveness, and support sustainable economic development. However, despite the renewed momentum of the negotiations, relaunched in 2022, the path to finalizing the FTA must surpass obstacles, like the domestic political and economic interests on both sides. In India, key sectors like agriculture, textiles, and small-scale industries have expressed concerns about increased competition from European imports, making the Indian governing officials cautious about liberalization. On the EU side, several Member-States remain hesitant due to concerns about India's regulatory environment, labor standards, and the level of protection afforded to their own critical industries. The need for the European Union to reduce its dependency from the US, on trade, has already led Ursula von der Leyen to stating, in September 2025, that the Commission wants to finalize the FTA with India by the end of the year (REUTERS, 2025). Furthermore, the EU has refused President Trump's request to impose 100% tariffs on India, due to being one of the main buyers of Russian oil, such is its strategic importance. By addressing these priorities, the EU and India can deepen their strategic alignment and strengthen their role as pillars of stability in an increasingly uncertain global environment.

5. Conclusion

As the global geopolitical and geoeconomic landscapes become increasingly fragmented, the European Union and India find themselves at a critical crossroad. Their shared democratic values, complementary economic strengths, and common interest in a stable, rules-based international order make their partnership not only desirable, but essential. The shifting dynamics of global trade, particularly the rise of protectionist policies from the United States and the strategic assertiveness of China, underscore the urgency of solidifying a deeper and more resilient EU-India partnership. Finalizing a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement would mark a significant milestone in this evolving partnership. It offers the potential to unlock vast economic opportunities, enhance strategic cooperation, and position both parties as key players in a multipolar global order. While challenges persist, ranging from regulatory divergences to sectoral sensitivities, there is growing political will on both sides to overcome these hurdles. In this context, the EU and India must act decisively. Building on decades of diplomatic engagement and recent momentum, they have the opportunity to shape a partnership that can serve as a model for bilateral cooperation in an era defined by uncertainty and competition, promoting sustainable development and ensuring mutual prosperity in the decades to come.

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About the Article

Main Question: How is Russia using BRICS+ and the SCO to navigate Western isolation? Argument: Following Western sanctions and exclusion, Russia pivots to BRICS+ and the SCO for economic, diplomatic, and ideological leverage. Conclusion: These frameworks help Russia maintain global influence and pursue multipolarity, but dependence on partners like China limits full strategic autonomy.

About the Author

Giacomo Cifelli's topic of focus is Russia's foreign policy and Moscow's involvement in Middle Eastern and North African geopolitics. His research explores identity, status-seeking, great power competition, and how these shape Russia's foreign policy. He aims to inform policy makers through critical, multidisciplinary analysis and cross-institutional collaboration.

1. Introduction

Since 2014, Russia's foreign policy has undergone a profound reorientation, driven by its annexation of Crimea and subsequent deterioration of relations with the West. These events initiated a steady pivot toward non-Western partners and institutions. This pivot sharply accelerated after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which brought unprecedented sanctions, economic decoupling, and near-total exclusion from Western-led forums. In this context, the main argument of this essay is that Russia has turned to alternative models of cooperation, chiefly BRICS+ and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), as both a response to Western diplomatic isolation and a deliberate strategy to reaffirm its status as a great power. Moscow relies on these frameworks for economic lifelines, diplomatic platforms, and ideological arenas to contest Western norms. Yet, internal divisions and reliance on China within these groups limit their effectiveness as full substitutes for Western engagement. This dual strategy, leveraging BRICS+ and the SCO as both a response to diplomatic isolation and a tool for securing great-power standing, is central to understanding Russia's evolving foreign policy. The following sections trace this reorientation, situating it in the context of Russia's great-power identity, its multipolar ambitions, and the specific benefits and constraints these coalitions offer.

2. Western Isolation, Great-Power Identity, and the Turn to Multipolarity

Russia's foreign policy shift since 2014 cannot be understood without the effects of Western exclusion and great-power identity in Moscow's worldview. The annexation of Crimea led to sanctions and suspended Russia from the G8 and Western forums (Sergunin, 2020). These actions began partially, but the 2022 Ukraine invasion brought sweeping sanctions, frozen reserves, and cut institutional ties with NATO and the EU. This isolation was not just economic, it challenged the symbolic core of Russia's international identity. For Russian leaders, great-power status relies on being part of global decision-making, peer recognition, and a key role in resolving global issues. Exclusion from Western forums weakened both international and domestic legitimacy for the Kremlin, as it depends on projecting Russia as a central actor (Vuksanović, 2025; Lukin, 2015). Moskalenko et al. (2024) note Moscow sees Western policies as deliberate efforts to uphold a unipolar order and sideline Russia. The Kremlin responded by building ties with the Global South and presenting itself as part of a „global majority" resisting Western dominance (Vuksanović, 2025). This outreach opened new trade and diplomatic opportunities and helped Putin counter isolation narratives by showing Russia as an essential global player. Gabuev (2025) notes that BRICS membership lets Moscow join a dynamic club of emerging powers shaping a „post-American" order. This shift became an embrace of multipolarity, a view that the U.S.-led West is just one centre among several. Partnerships with China, India, and others strengthened this narrative (Gabuev, 2025; Vuksanović, 2025). Russian officials argued the Ukraine crisis showed the West wanted to preserve unipolarity, pushing Russia to the East and Global South (Lukin, 2015). A Russian analysis concluded the 2014 crisis had "consolidated BRICS... [helping] create a real multipolar world" (Lukin, 2015, p. 18). In international relations terms, Russia's engagement with BRICS and the SCO reflects this multipolar outlook. These groups offer Moscow and partners ways to influence global governance outside Western institutions (Moskalenko et al., 2024; Brosig, 2024). Analysts say BRICS+ and the SCO help Russia weather sanctions and provide arenas to challenge Western-based global governance and promote multipolarity (Moskalenko et al., 2024). Russia's pivot is both reactive and an assertion of autonomy, aiming to reshape global structures for its own and other emerging powers' benefit (Moskalenko et al., 2024; Brosig, 2024). By promoting norms of sovereignty and non-interference, Russia and its allies present their blocs as alternatives to Western liberal dominance (Moskalenko et al., 2024; Seshadri, 2023). This stance appeals to many countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America who distrust Western

intervention and want pluralistic global leadership. For Moscow, aligning with BRICS and the SCO is both a practical move to escape isolation and a statement affirming its great-power identity within a multipolar world.

3. BRICS+: Russia's Alternative Coalition

One cornerstone of Russia's diversification strategy is BRICS, the bloc comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (now expanding into "BRICS+" with new members and partners). Even before 2014, BRICS was touted by Moscow as a vehicle for a more equitable world order, but Western sanctions and isolation efforts gave this coalition new strategic importance. Moscow began using BRICS not only to pursue economic cooperation but explicitly "to counter Western economic sanctions and avoid international isolation." Notably, in March 2014 the other BRICS countries shielded Russia diplomatically by abstaining from a UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's actions in Crimea (Sergunin, 2020). Later that year, the BRICS foreign ministers jointly opposed calls to expel Russia from the G20 summit, thus preventing Moscow's geopolitical isolation by the West (Sergunin, 2020). Such solidarity sent a signal that Russia still had powerful friends, frustrating Western attempts to label it a pariah. As one report observes, "in 2014, fellow BRICS nations shielded Russian President Vladimir Putin from diplomatic exclusion after the annexation of Crimea" (Sergunin, 2020). The BRICS stance against punitive measures was principled as well: the 2014 BRICS Fortaleza Declaration pointedly condemned "unilateral military interventions and economic sanctions" as violations of international law (Seshadri, 2023). For Russia, BRICS became a crucial diplomatic and economic lifeline after 2014, letting Moscow present itself as part of a dynamic club of non-Western powers shaping a "post-American" world (Gabuev, 2025). BRICS also serves as a sandbox for Russia to develop financial, trade, and technological tools outside U.S.-dominated mechanisms, including efforts to reduce reliance on the U.S. dollar and insulate against Western sanctions. While the desire to bypass Western economic constraints predates 2014, it gained urgency after the sanctions. BRICS enables Russia to amplify its narrative globally, uphold sovereignty, and coordinate diplomatic positions. Thus, BRICS helps Russia maintain practical ties and broadcast a normative challenge to Western leadership. BRICS participation yields clear benefits for Moscow, supporting regime legitimacy through high-profile summits, offering protection against Western pressure by upholding sovereignty and non-interference, and boosting Russia's global prestige (Brosig, 2024). This framework enhances Russia's authority among developing countries and signals to domestic audiences that the country is not isolated, all while reinforcing core priorities on sovereignty and multipolarity (Vuksanović, 2025). Equally important are the economic dividends of BRICS cooperation. As Western markets closed off, Russia expanded trade with BRICS partners, reorienting exports and finance toward the East and Global South. Scholars note that "the deepening of cooperation among BRICS economies has effectively promoted Russia's trade transformation" under sanctions (Li & Han, 2025, p. 108). For example, China rapidly grew as a buyer of Russian energy; by 2018 China alone accounted for 15% of Russia's foreign trade, a share that has only increased since (Gabuev, 2025). After Russia's broader invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this trend accelerated: China and India absorbed most of Russia's redirected crude oil exports, while Brazil (not part of sanctions) sharply increased imports of Russian diesel and other refined fuels (Ghanem, 2024). In 2023, Brazil's imports of Russian diesel surged by 4,600% year-on-year, vividly illustrating how BRICS economies undercut Western attempts to economically isolate Russia (Ghanem, 2024). Furthermore, BRICS countries have coordinated to establish parallel financial mechanisms that reduce reliance on the West. They founded the

BRICS+ & SCO Strategy:
Russia's use of emerging-economy coalitions and Eurasian security frameworks to counter Western exclusion, secure economic ties, and project great-power status

New Development Bank (NDB) in 2015 (headquartered in Shanghai) and a $100 billion Contingent Reserve Arrangement, institutions meant to complement (and quietly challenge) the IMF/World Bank system (Gabuev, 2025). While not overtly anti-Western, these initiatives address the failure of existing Bretton Woods institutions to give emerging economies a fair voice (Gabuev, 2025). The BRICS also regularly discuss alternatives to the U.S. dollar in trade and have increased the use of local currencies in settlements (Gabuev, 2025). All of this aligns with Russia's interest in a more multipolar financial order. As Gabuev (2025) observes, Moscow wants to make global markets "less prone to U.S. sanctions," whether via new BRICS payment systems, trading hubs for commodities outside Western control, or other "BRICS ecosystem" ideas. Although progress is gradual (even Russia's own use of the NDB has been limited by global market realities), these efforts underscore how BRICS has become integral to Russia's long-term strategy for sanctions evasion and economic resilience. Perhaps most telling was the symbolism of the October 2024 BRICS+ Summit in Kazan, Russia. By that time, BRICS had invited six new members (including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt) and dozens of interested "partner" countries, a significant expansion dubbed "BRICS+" (Gabuev, 2025). As summit host, Moscow portrayed the expansion as a "defining moment" heralding a "post-Western world order in which the 'global majority' is finally empowered" (Vuksanović, 2025). President Putin, addressing the summit, extolled BRICS as the foundation for a "Pax Post-Americana" and lambasted Western neo-colonialism (Gabuev, 2025). The Kazan summit was thus a propaganda victory for the Kremlin: it dramatically showcased Russia's ability to convene and lead a large coalition despite Western ostracism. Indeed, it was cited as clear proof of "the futility of Western efforts to isolate the country and Putin personally" (Gabuev, 2025). In Putin's narrative, initiatives like BRICS+ demonstrate that far from being alone, Russia is spearheading a powerful grouping that represents more than 40% of the world's population and a large share of global GDP (Gabuev, 2025). This message resonates in much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where many states bristle at Western dominance. Even countries traditionally friendly with the West have shown interest in BRICS as a way to diversify their alignments without "choosing sides", for example, Indonesia joined BRICS in early 2025, and others like Saudi Arabia are set to follow (Gabuev, 2025). Thus, for Russia, BRICS has evolved into a centrepiece of its foreign policy: a multi-regional coalition that buttresses Russia's international standing while pursuing reforms toward a more multipolar global system.

Figure 1: UN Photo/Anais Carolina Fernandes, 2025 – Source: [1] References

4. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Eurasian Diversification

Parallel to its BRICS activism, Russia has leaned on the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as part of its "Turn to the East." The SCO was founded in 2001 by Russia, China, and four Central Asian states. It was originally focused on regional security and counterterrorism. Post-2014, however, Moscow tried to elevate the SCO's role in its foreign policy to compensate for frayed ties with the West. Russian officials explicitly linked tension with the West to greater SCO engagement. During Russia's 2015 chairmanship of the SCO (just after Crimea), the Kremlin pushed for further consolidation and new initiatives within the SCO. It hoped to invigorate the organization amid the Ukraine crisis fallout (Lukin, 2015). Moscow's aims included expanding SCO economic cooperation and perhaps using it as a geopolitical counterweight in Eurasia. The timing was no coincidence, as one observer put it, "the SCO... might be stimulated by the tension between Russia and the West." Russia worked to strengthen the body as its confrontation with NATO/EU intensified (Lukin, 2015). Russia's strategic rationale for the SCO is multifaceted. First, the SCO offers a platform for deepening ties with China and Central Asian neighbours. Second, it allows Russia to manage Eurasian security issues without Western involvement and to present a unified stance on principles such as opposition to external interference. After 2014, Putin's government "continuously looked East, including to fellow SCO members, for diplomatic support" to break out of isolation (Lanteigne, 2018). In practice, this shift resulted in more frequent bilateral consultations and SCO summits, joint military exercises (notably the "Peace Mission" drills), and greater coordination on issues like Afghanistan. The inclusion of India and Pakistan in 2017, and Iran in 2023, also matched Russia's vision of building a broader Eurasian coalition, bringing together diverse, sometimes rival states under a loose, non-Western security framework.

> **"Russia leverages BRICS+ and the SCO to bypass Western sanctions, maintain global influence, and promote a multipolar world order despite partner constraints"**

However, Russia's SCO diplomacy has had mixed results. Other SCO members have been cautious not to endorse Russia's controversial actions outright. For instance, China and the Central Asian states remained neutral or muted regarding Russia's 2008 war in Georgia and the 2014 Ukraine crisis (Lanteigne, 2018). They joined in general calls for dialogue and peace. However, they did not recognize Russia's unilateral moves. None recognized Crimea's annexation, similar to their stance on Georgia's breakaway regions (Lanteigne, 2018). A contemporary expert noted that "Moscow didn't get any [explicit] support aside from general statements" from its SCO allies in those instances. This highlights the "limits of Russia's influence" even among friendly authoritarian neighbors (Lanteigne, 2018). This reluctance stems partly from China's and others' own interests. Beijing, for example, values stability and was unwilling to jeopardize ties with the West or set precedents that might encourage separatism in its territory (Lanteigne, 2018). Central Asian members similarly balance between Russia, China, and the West. They were not ready to side unequivocally with Moscow. Thus, while the SCO provides Russia a forum for engagement, it has not functioned as an outright alliance backing Russia's every move. Nonetheless, the SCO remains important for Russia's post-2014 foreign policy, serving three key functions. First, it anchors Russia in a regional coalition where Western states have no presence, supporting Moscow's idea of a "Greater Eurasia." Second, it enables Russia to intensify security and economic cooperation with China, exemplified by joint military drills (such as China's PLA participation in Russia's Vostok-2018 wargames under an SCO framework) and the promotion of large Eurasian projects (Lanteigne, 2018). Third, it offers a diplomatic stage at high-profile annual summits, allowing Putin to meet multiple Asian leaders and project Russia's influence. Especially after 2014, Russia's media emphasized Putin's engagement at SCO forums to demonstrate he's "not isolated" but welcomed in Beijing, New Delhi, and Tashkent.

Even if the practical support is less robust than desired, the symbolic value remains significant. Russia has used SCO meetings, sometimes scheduled back-to-back with BRICS summits, to present an alternative diplomatic calendar emphasizing East–South cooperation, as opposed to the Western summits from which it is excluded (Lanteigne, 2018). In sum, the SCO is a pillar of Russia's diplomatic diversification: it solidifies Russia's pivot to Asia, helps manage its partnership with China, and reinforces the narrative of a "Greater Eurasia" that operates independently of Western blocs.

Figure 2: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025 –Source [2] References

5. Conclusion

Russia's turn toward BRICS+, the SCO, and other non-Western frameworks represents a fundamental reorientation of its foreign policy since 2014. Facing estrangement from the West, Moscow chose not to concede. Instead, it built alternative alliances and doubled down on a multipolar worldview. Institutions like BRICS and the SCO have become key instruments in this strategy. They allow Russia to maintain global engagement on its own terms, pursue economic opportunities, and lead a coalition of states similarly resistant to Western dominance. This approach is multidisciplinary in appeal. It satisfies geopolitical goals (great-power balancing), economic needs (sanctions evasion and new growth markets), and ideological impulses (civilizational identity and regime security). While challenges remain, internal differences within BRICS/SCO and the ambivalence of some partners, Russia has clearly derived significant leverage from these groupings. As Vuksanović (2025) notes, the Kremlin's southward and eastward shift "seeks to demonstrate that Russia is not isolated internationally" despite Western opposition. In doing so, Russia is essentially rewriting its foreign policy playbook. It is moving away from Euro-Atlantic integration. Instead, it champions clubs like BRICS+ and the SCO as foundations of a "post-West" international order. This broader diplomatic diversification is likely to persist. It has become intertwined with Russia's national narrative and its vision for a new global equilibrium where the West is just one of many power centers, not the uncontested arbiter of world affairs (Gabuev, 2025; Vuksanović, 2025).

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About the Article

Main Question: How does Russian digital diplomacy and PSYOPS influence politics and security in Central-Eastern Europe? Argument: Russia leverages social media, memes, fake news, and AI tools as part of hybrid warfare to polarize societies, manipulate elections, and destabilize NATO's eastern flank. Conclusion: Digital PSYOPS have tangible political and security impacts, as seen in Romania and Poland, highlighting the strategic role of information manipulation in modern hybrid conflict.

About the Author

Delfina Ertanowska is pursuing MA studies in Journalism and Social Communication: Interactive Marketing at UITM. BA in Jagiellonian University in the field of Public Health: Sanitary Inspection. 2025 European Academy of Diplomacy - Diplomacy: Foregin Affairs. Area of interests and research hybrid warfare, media propaganda, dezinformation, propangada and dezinformation in social media, visual communuation, IPSOS, war and cyber security, digital diplomacy. Speak 5 languages, english, ukrainian, polish, russian,

1. Introduction

Russia uses various tools, from cyberattacks, cyber criminality, stealing data, to legal ones such as online campaigns, fake news, hate speech, trolling, or using graphic forms such as cartoons and memes to ridicule and discredit the opponent. This part of the hybrid warfare (which is a part of Russian digital diplomacy – mostly shared propaganda and manipulated content) is carried out using all internet channels, social media and platforms. In cyber develop era, PSYOPS automatically use the digital domain like cyber activism, hacktivism, preparation for non violent resistance, but not only in traditional way which is described in Ivan Marovic's in his step-by-step guide called "The Path of Most Resistance" (Marovic, 2018). Of course it uses tactics, but tools have changed during the last 20 years. Starting from sponsored articles, favourable and often paid media in the EU, manipulated videos (such as those presenting Ukrainian soldiers in an unfavourable light) to fake comments on social media, manipulated and altered photographs, mocking cartoons or memes which, as a popular means of entertainment and communication in society, create in their own way a view of reality among users. Manipulated content in the form of videos and articles most often appears on Telegram, Viber and X platform channels, which allows them to efficiently bypass EU sanctions, thus allowing users to easily access such content without the need to install a VPN. Memes and cartoons are already appearing in all social media, and while they can be treated as free artistic creation, they are also an element of well-paid campaigns. In Poland, for example, there are companies that provide services of creating marketing and political campaigns through memes (Ertanowska, 2021, p.187-195). Russia is a step further, using subliminal action to give the impression that the majority of society thinks in one way or another. These include anti-Ukrainian campaigns conducted with particular intensity in Poland and Slovakia, anti-immigration campaigns conducted throughout Europe (like Poland) (Walker, 2025), alleged promotion of „traditional values" aimed at slandering life in Western Europe and negating progress. Pro-Russian campaigns in Latvia and Estonia. Are targeted hybrid attacks aimed not only at inciting antagonisms and social polarisation but also at having a real impact on the election of politicians or on cybersecurity and military security, as in the recent cases in Poland and Romania.

2. Research question and purpose:

How psychological-information campaigns, both in the framework of Russian hybrid warfare and digital diplomacy, influence the polarisation of society and have a real impact on politics and the security of NATO's eastern flank? This paper aims to highlight and expose the use of psychological-information campaigns applied within digital diplomacy in the context of the use of digital, visual communication and social media to spread disinformation, hate speech, and trolling. The paper focuses primarily on social media and the use of digital communication as a propaganda tool for conducting both soft power disinformation through digital diplomacy, but also as a tool of hybrid warfare in PSYOP campaigns aimed at destabilising social order, politics, and security on NATO's eastern flank.

3. Propaganda tools used by Russia as an element of digital diplomacy which are part of hybrid activities:

Hybrid & Information Warfare: Media propaganda, spreading antagonisms via social media using tools such as manipulated photos, videos, memes, deepfakes, fake news, often created by AI tools. These operations include "active measures" reminiscent of Cold War tactics, aiming to undermine Western democracies, influence elections (e.g., Brexit, EU-Ukraine agreements), and discredit the EU and NATO.

- Troll Farms and Propaganda Networks: The GLOBSEC Policy Institute documents coordinated disinformation across Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, last time in Poland, urging cooperation across intelligence, media, and education sectors to counter these threats. Also, media reports and V4 groups reported it.

- Localized Disinformation: In example Estonia, Russian operations include financial, political, and cyber components aimed at manipulating internal affairs. A notable example is the 2007 cyberattack, widely viewed as a strategic disinformation operation. In Poland: cyberattacks, arson, disinformation, racial and religious hate campaigns.

- Pro-Kremlin Messaging Networks: The Doppelgänger campaign (Alaphilippe & Machado & Miguel & Poldi, 2022) digital diplomacy PSYOPS campaigns. The Pravda network pushes millions of pro-Russian articles annually. Its content infiltrates platforms like Wikipedia, AI models, and social media, seeking to influence public opinion and AI-generated outputs worldwide.

- Social Media: like Telegram, Viber, X, as platforms to build "underground Guerrilla" often called the 5th column, in Central Eastern members of the EU.

Russian Digital Diplomacy:
The use of PSYOPS, disinformation, memes, AI, and social media platforms to influence politics, polarize societies, and undermine NATO and EU cohesion

4. Russian digital interference in the Romanian elections

In 2024, the presidential elections were annulled by the Romanian Constitutional Court due to serious irregularities, including external interference, which undermined their fairness and transparency. The main allegations concerned the illegal use of digital technologies (buying followers, bots, fake content and accounts), artificial intelligence, and covert financing of the election campaign. Both national and international institutions confirmed (Pelin, 2025) that these activities were aimed at supporting the pro-Russian candidate, Călin Georgescu. This is one of the most striking examples of the use of digital diplomacy and psychological operations (PSYOPS) by Russia in the Central and Eastern European region. According to the report of the Romanian Prosecutor General, Russian entities were involved in disinformation campaigns during the 2024 presidential elections. Advanced digital technologies were used, including bots, trolling, and AI, to generate and disseminate content aimed at fuelling social tensions, polarisation, and hate speech – which also translated into real criminal incidents. One of the tactics of this psychological-information operation was the use of hashtags – in this case, the word „revolution" – in order to mobilise and manipulate public opinion. Additionally, four companies with clear links to the Russian Federation were identified as responsible for disinformation activities directly targeting Romanian society (Dumitrescu, 2025). Another tactic used in this cyber operation was the fairly common method of using social media platforms – in particular TikTok, Telegram, and X (formerly Twitter) – to spread false information. One of the leading fake news items was a manipulated video falsely claiming that French troops stationed in Romania were disguised in Romanian gendarmerie uniforms in order to interfere in the elections (Blackburn, 2025). Romania's Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Internal Affairs, and Defence issued a joint statement condemning these disinformation activities as Russian interference in the electoral process.The decision of the Constitutional Court to annul the elections provoked controversy both domestically and abroad, and the issue of the Romanian elections made headlines around the world. Călin Georgescu himself, who had obtained the highest result in the first round of the elections, condemned the decision as a coup d'état. His rival, Elena Lasconi, in turn, warned of the threat to democracy. International observers, including US Vice President JD Vance and billionaire

Elon Musk, criticised the annulment of the elections, while the ambassadors of Germany, France, and the Netherlands expressed their support for the independence of the Romanian judiciary (Ilie & Charlish & Kerry, 2025). and supported the sovereignty of Romania's elections and decisions. The consequence of the annulment of the elections due to Russian psychological-information influence was the blocking and removal of fake accounts, bots, and trolls. TikTok removed a "cluster" of accounts supporting the pro-Russian candidate Călin Georgescu, which violated the rules regarding unlabelled political advertising. Additionally, the platform deleted 66,000 fake accounts and 10 million fake followers before the elections (Financial Times, 2025) This unprecedented event sparked a discussion on political campaigns on the internet, the use of AI, bots, trolling, and the spread of disinformation having a real impact on state politics, particularly on the eastern flank of NATO, in which Russia has an "interest" in interfering in public opinion and the selection of politicians favourable to its agenda.

> **"Russia employs digital PSYOPS and propaganda campaigns in Central-Eastern Europe to manipulate elections, spread disinformation, and destabilize democratic societies"**

5. Russian conventional and hybrid attack on Poland

In September 2025, Russia carried out the largest conventional attack on the territory of a NATO state since the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Although since 2022 there have been regular Russian provocations in the form of violations of the airspace of countries on NATO's eastern flank, the drone attack that violated Poland's airspace was the largest military provocation. In addition to the conventional attack, Russia conducted a coordinated disinformation campaign aimed at placing the blame on Ukraine for the incident. The objective of this operation was to undermine trust in Poland's allies, destabilise relations between Poland and Ukraine, and also strongly destabilise and polarise Polish society. Mainly digital disinformation mechanisms were used: frequently employed against Poland were fake news, bots, trolling, and in particular hate speech – mainly in the form of comments on social media. Russian propaganda sources spread narratives suggesting that the damage caused by the drones was the result of an earlier storm, not an attack. It was also claimed that Ukraine had used „repaired Russian drones", pointing to the presence of duct tape on the wreckage as evidence. However, these claims were quickly debunked by photographic and video evidence, as well as witness testimonies and rescue services (DISA, 2025). Additionally, a report by the organisation Res Futura (Jones, 2025) indicated an organised disinformation campaign in Polish social media, in which 38% of comments blamed Ukraine and 34% blamed Russia. The analysis showed that these narratives were the result of activity by pro-Russian accounts, aimed at undermining trust in the Polish government and NATO (Jones, 2025). The matter became so serious that it provoked a reaction from the Polish authorities. The Polish Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Digital Affairs, Krzysztof Gawkowski, described the attack as „a planned provocation coordinated with a disinformation campaign" (Sonko, 2025). He emphasised that Poland has evidence confirming the intentional nature of the attack and the associated disinformation activities. In response to these events, Poland undertook actions aimed at protecting its sovereignty and the integrity of its democratic processes.

6. Conclusions

The case of Romania constitutes an example of the use of digital diplomacy and psychological operations by Russia in order to influence democratic processes in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The use of advanced digital technologies, social media platforms, and informational manipulation was aimed at supporting a pro-Russian candidate and undermining citizens' trust in democratic institutions. In response to these threats, Romania undertook actions aimed at protecting its

sovereignty and the integrity of democratic processes. PSYOPS automatically use the digital domain now. This is the reason for their propaganda and digital diplomacy tools to justify their aggression towards Ukraine, and also justify their influence which purpose is to divide the European Union. The case of the drone attack on Poland in 2025 illustrates the use of digital diplomacy and psychological operations by Russia in order to influence democratic processes in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The use of advanced digital technologies, social media platforms, and informational manipulation was aimed at undermining citizens' trust in democratic institutions, trust in Poland's defensive capabilities, building antagonisms between Poland and Ukraine, fuelling already tense relations, in particular the waves of xenophobia that have recently been spreading through Polish society towards foreigners, especially those of Ukrainian and Belarusian origin residing on the territory of Poland.

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About the Article

Main Question: How do European countries advance defence-industrial integration amid limited EU consensus? Argument: In response to US dependence and fragmented EU structures, states pursue minilateral cooperation through bilateral/trilateral frameworks. Conclusion: Europe balances agility and durability in defence industrial policy by combining soft-law diplomacy for early alignment with hard-law instruments for long-term strategic and industrial integration.

About the Author

Andrea Perucca is an EU enthusiast with a background in government consultancy and academic training at the crossroads of economics and politics. His research focuses on the Mediterranean and the Southern Neighbourhood, where he sees securitization as key to Europe's geopolitical strategy. He is strongly committed to rethinking defence and security patterns that extend to environmental and climate policy pathways.

1. Introduction

European defence has traditionally been understood as falling within national borders and legislation, reflecting long-standing contradictions between its political and economic dimensions. While political interests have favoured the retention of national control and governance—consistently vetoing any transfer of power to supranational institutions—the defence industry's supply chain is highly transnational and largely dependent on third countries, both within and beyond Europe, for technology and raw materials. The United States, for historical reasons and its comparative advantages, continues to play a dominant role. Notably, SIPRI reports that between 2020 and 2024, conventional arms imports from the US accounted for 64% of Europe's total, the highest share in two decades. Beyond this dependence on the US and its security architecture, the EU lacks both the political mandate and authority to pursue a common industrial defence strategy. Top-down supranational initiatives such as the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) aim to build shared ground through joint procurement, yet limited funding and political support have constrained their impact. This vacuum has opened space for alternative forms of diplomacy, where complementary bottom-up mechanisms gain traction. Such dynamics emerge through variable geometries (Bertoncini, 2017) within the EU and NATO—flexible, often minilateral (Brummer 2014; Heiduk 2024) coalitions that use political momentum to deliver tangible results. This paper examines industrial defence as a case in which bilateral and trilateral agreements shape the expansion of Europe's defence-industrial base. It asks: Why and how do such agreements influence industrial integration, and how does their legal bindingness affect speed and effectiveness? Two case studies—the Trinity House Agreement (UK–Germany, 2024), and the Italy–Germany Action Plan (2023)—illustrate how differing legal and governance frameworks affect outcomes.

2. Assessing the EU's Industrial Defence Landscape

As reported by ISPI, in 2022 the EU defence industry recorded turnover growth of 10% compared to the previous year, with employment growth around 4%. Nonetheless, the top names in the list in 2023 are entirely US or Chinese companies; more specifically, the United States occupies the first five spots: Lockheed Martin Corp. ($60,810 in revenues), RTX ($40,660), Northrop Grumman Corp. ($35,570), Boeing ($31,100), and General Dynamics Corp. ($30,200). The only exception on European soil is the UK-based BAE Systems ($25B of turnover), right before Russian and Chinese companies that complete the top-10 list. Where is the EU at this point? Well, moving further down to 12th is Airbus, the most well-known example of trans-European cooperation, followed by Leonardo (Italy, 13th in revenues), Thales (France, 16th in revenues), Rheinmetall (Germany, 26th in revenues), and MBDA (trans-European, 30th in revenues) (SIPRI). While this table shows a secondary and subordinated position of EU industries vis-à-vis US/China dominance, a further assessment of the European industrial landscape adds important remarks that must be considered. As noted by the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS), the segmentation of Europe's arms industry closely follows the countries that in 2000 signed the Letter of Intent (LoI): Restructuring the European Defence Industry—France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, and the UK. This LoI, an interinstitutional agreement, established committees in six areas of expertise. Even though the European Commission has sought to take over coordination and harmonisation through the establishment of the European Defence Agency (EDA) in 2004, the six LoI signatories still account for the overwhelming majority (around 90%) of arms production. The supply chain itself extends beyond the HQ countries into regional areas across the EU, forming a widely interconnected "spaghetti bowl" of industrial production (Béraud-Sudreau, Scarazzato, 2023)

Rank	Company	Country/Region	Arms Revenues (USD Million)	Share of total Revenues (%)
1	Lockhead Martin Corp.	United States	60,810	90
2	RTX (Raytheon Tech.)	United States	40,660	59
3	Northon Grumman Corp.	United States	35,570	91
4	Boeing	United States	31,100	40
5	General Dynamics Corp.	United States	20,200	71
6	BAE Systems	United Kingdom	29,810	98
7	Rostec	Russia	21,730	65
8	AVIC	China	20,850	25
9	NORINCO	China	20,560	27
10	CETEC	China	16,050	29
12	Airbus	Trans-European	12,890	18
13	Leonardo	Italy	12,390	75
16	Thales Group	France	10,350	52
26	Rheinmetall AG	Germany	5,480	77
30	MBDA	Trans-European	4,760	99

Figure 1: Table 1– Top Global Defence Companies by Arms Revenues, 2023 (USD millions) Source: SIPRI Top 100 Arms-Producing and Military Services Companies, 2023 (Fact Sheet, Dec 2024).

In this regard, CSDS notes the pan-European footprint of companies: Thales is the most integrated into the EU production chain, with 10 subsidiaries and production sites in Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal, Poland, Romania, Denmark, Finland, Latvia, and Norway. Other companies are more geographically concentrated; nevertheless, Airbus has three extra-territorial subsidiaries, Rheinmetall also has three, Leonardo has two, and BAE Systems has one.

Company	Number of Subsidiaries/ Production Sites in Other European Countries	Countries of Presence
Thales Group	10	Austria, Belgium, Netherlands, Portugal, Poland, Romania, Denmark, Finland, Latvia, Norway
Airbus	3	France, Germany, Spain (core operations), plus cross-border subsidiaries
Rheinmetall AG	3	Germany (HQ), Netherlands, Hungary, Italy
Leonardo S.p.A	2	United Kingdom, Poland
BAE Systems	1	Sweden

Figure 2: Table 2 – Pan-European Presence of Major Defence Companies (Number of Subsidiaries / Production Sites in Other European Countries) Source: CSDS (VUB), Beyond Fragmentation? Mapping the European Arms Industry (In-Depth n° 2023/07, Aug 2023, Table 2.1).

Zooming out from companies to their main procurers—the nation-states—the Kiel Institute has analysed public procurement over a four-year period (2020–2024) in Germany, the United Kingdom, and France. For Germany, out of the majority of procurement (n.315 orders, n.237 publicly available), more than half the orders—n.191 (80%)—come from leading German developers; a further n.15 procurements (6%) see the leading participation of other European countries (Norway and the UK included), while n.31 procurements (13%) are assigned to US and Israeli developers. Data regarding France can only be partially read: out of n.71 procurements reported, only n.26 are available in the Kiel reports. French companies as main developers account for n.17 procurements (65%); n.7 orders list German companies as main developers (26%); n.1 lists the UK as main developer and n.1 the US. As for the United Kingdom, out of n.159 procurements reported (n.142 available in the Kiel report), n.114 procurements list leading UK companies as developers, n.14 procurements list other EU member-state companies as main developers, and n.14 list extra-EU main developers.

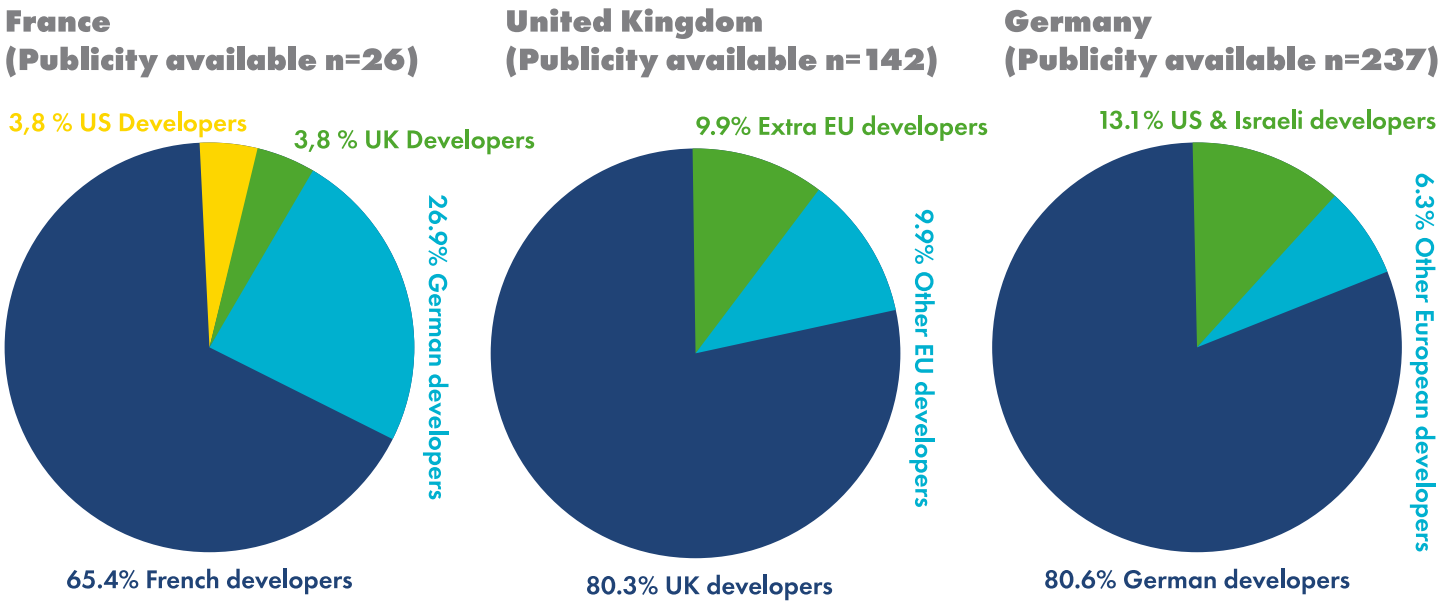

Figure 3: Source: Author's draft based on Kiel Institute (IfW Kiel) Military Procurement Tracker, 2024.

What can therefore be assessed by grouping these data is that the EU mostly relies on its European-based companies. These firms are relatively small in scale, yet they benefit from a well-developed pan-European framework. This leaves room for future growth, driven by rising demand for supplies and a renewed political momentum for pan-European integration.

2. Hybrid cooperation in the vacuum

The rising levels of conflict and geopolitical tension have pushed European countries into a rapid rearmament process that conceals a wide range of structural challenges—further compounded by the growing volume of military aid to Ukraine in its ongoing war with Russia. The European Union's domestic weapons production capacity is insufficient to meet this surge in demand: suppliers lack the ability to expand their order books quickly, and deliveries are often delayed by several years, while national governments seek to procure more equipment immediately. In the short term, this imbalance has led to a sharp increase in imports; beyond that, however, both market and political actors are engaging in new initiatives and reforms aimed at strengthening the defence industrial base within EU borders. A new wave of minilateralism has emerged to fill the gap, as European countries increasingly seek to establish bilateral agreements that strengthen long-term commitments and industrial capacity. The inherently intergovernmental nature of this trend recalls the use of variable geometries and forms of enhanced cooperation, designed to foster joint initiatives and secure a share of present and future defence procurements and market opportunities. In line with definitions proposed by Brummen (2014) and Heiduk (2024), minilateralism refers to small, flexible, and issue-focused coalitions that operate as soft-law instruments capable of evolving toward institutionalisation. Such arrangements have been widely promoted by European governments, resulting in initiatives that are at times complementary, at times overlapping, and often situated between the institutional architectures of the EU and NATO.The EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) has mapped nearly 200 defence partnerships, ranging from comprehensive international treaties to lighter arrangements such as Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and Statements of Intent (SoIs). This intricate network of regional partnerships is driven by a wide variety of factors, reflecting differences in purpose, structure, and strategic intent. Some partnerships are shaped by geographical proximity—for instance, the NB8 framework involving the Baltic and Nordic states—while others emerge from shared technological or industrial interests. Moreover, while certain partnerships remain traditional, top-down agreements, an increasing number of defence collaborations today are bottom-up and demand-driven, reflecting new

patterns of industrial and operational interdependence. Alongside these regional formats, bilateral agreements continue to represent the most common form of European defence cooperation, though they vary considerably in both scope and level of commitment.

The Italy–Germany Action Plan

The Action Plan for Reinforcing Bilateral Cooperation and in the EU Framework was signed in Berlin in 2023 by Giorgia Meloni and Olaf Scholz. The main focuses of cooperation are broadly integrated, involving topics such as the economy (industrial policy, internal market, digital innovation, scientific cooperation), climate policy (energy, climate diplomacy, infrastructures), defence and security (EU defence cooperation and the defence industry), the advancement of the EU agenda, and cultural dialogue. The signature of this political framework includes neither a ratification clause nor an enforcement mechanism. Regarding the defence industry paragraph, the parties are committed to continuing their cooperation within already established frameworks. The Action Plan cites programmes in which Italy and Germany are already core partners (such as the Submarine U212A/NFS and the VULCANO ammunition programme), as well as structured EU programmes in which both countries play a significant role (including EURODRONE, METEOR, and the NH-90 programme). It also mentions NATO-based programmes such as the AGS – NATO Alliance Ground Surveillance, which relies on a US-based platform, and the Hypersonic Defence Interceptor Study/System (HDIS) programme, a nationally contributed project (with 14 participating countries) integrated within an EU framework. Despite referencing a wide range of cooperation programmes, no specific joint governance mechanism is established, as discussions are generally delegated to "existing mechanisms and to the framework of the Strategic Dialogue on Defence." The Parties also commit to exploring the potential for further cooperation and implementation programmes extending across all domains. The scope of bilateral commitments, however, remains broad in both areas and instruments. Wherever the Italy–Germany partnership is considered "core," there may exist patterns of co-design and common standards. An example is the joint venture (50%/50%) between Italy's Leonardo and Germany's Rheinmetall for the development of the Armoured Infantry Combat System (AICS), known as Leonardo Rheinmetall Military Vehicles (LRMV). The company is headquartered in Rome, with an operational base in La Spezia, and began operating in Q1 2025. Other programmes mentioned do not feature Italy and Germany as core partners — for instance, the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS), where France and Germany form the main bilateral partnership. Nevertheless, Italy has been exploring potential future participation in the programme and has participated as a formal observer since 2022. A further dimension of cooperation mentioned in the Action Plan concerns projects within the EU and NATO frameworks, such as the Next Generation Rotorcraft Capability (NGRC) and the Ground Based Air Defence (GBAD) programmes. The Kensington "Friendship and Bilateral Cooperation" Treaty and the "Trinity House Agreements" UK-DE The UK–Germany bilateral cooperation framework, concluded by Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Chancellor Friedrich Merz, consists of a three-part structure: (1) the Trinity House Defence Agreement (23 October 2024), which sets the defence-cooperation governance; (2) the Kensington Treaty (17 July 2025), a hard-law state treaty; and (3) the Article-22 Implementation Plan, which operationalises delivery on a biennial cycle. The Kensington Treaty's central clause is the mutual-assistance commitment in Article 3(3), under which the Parties "shall assist one another, including by military means, in case of an armed attack." This is a strong legal obligation in the current European security context. The treaty's legal robustness is that of hard law: it enters into force upon exchange of instruments of ratification, as stipulated in Article 30. Concerning the

Minilateralism:
Flexible, small-scale coalitions of states using bilateral/trilateral agreements or soft law to advance defence-industrial integration within Europe

defence industry, the treaty sets out broad, programmatic aims, while specific measures are found in the Trinity House Defence Agreement (which provides the implementation architecture), its Implementation Plan, and UK Ministry of Defence documents that operationalise the projects. The Deep Precision Strike programme is the first example: the UK and Germany lead a joint effort to deliver a new deep-precision strike capability within a decade as a conventional deterrent in Europe. This bilateral effort is coordinated with the multinational European Long-Range Strike Approach (ELSA), within which the UK and Germany co-lead the "2,000 km+" cluster. Nonetheless, no further details have yet been provided on implementation steps, governance arrangements, or budget commitments. The UK and Germany also commit to collaborate on the development of advanced uncrewed aerial systems (UAS) and maritime drones; they have agreed to the joint procurement of new Sting Ray torpedoes for their aircraft; and they will continue their close BOXER cooperation, including the RCH 155 artillery, extending cooperation to common off-board systems for Future Ground Combat Systems. Notably, BOXER is produced under ARTEC GmbH (a joint venture between Rheinmetall and KNDS Deutschland) as prime contractor via OCCAR, while UK manufacture is carried out by RBSL and KNDS UK. Perhaps following the political agreements and commitments, Rheinmetall unveiled its UK Gun Hall project: an artillery gun-barrel factory in Telford (UK) using British steel supplied by Sheffield Forgemasters. Production is scheduled to begin in 2027. Rheinmetall also plans to establish a UK-based Advanced Land Autonomy Centre of Excellence, focused on the integration, testing, and deployment of autonomous systems. This signals a further commitment to innovation in the country. The parties also commit to strengthening defence-industrial and export cooperation by expanding the UK–Germany Defence Industry Forum, exploring joint procurements where requirements align, and pursuing joint export campaigns for jointly produced equipment—leveraging the UK's accession to the Germany–France–Spain arms-export control treaty.

> **"European defence-industrial integration relies on a continuum from soft-law political coordination to hard-law treaties, balancing flexibility, enforceability, and long-term capability development"**

4. Soft law vs. Hard law, evaluating effectiveness

These two frameworks of bilateral cooperation illustrate the range of instruments employed by European diplomacy to establish closer strategic ties with partners. While clear patterns can be observed, the comparison between hard and soft law frameworks reveals distinct outcomes. The Italy–Germany Action Plan establishes a joint agenda-setting mechanism but lacks any ratification or enforcement clauses, reflecting a politically driven rather than legally binding approach. In contrast, the UK–Germany agreements provide clear legal robustness through the hard-law Kensington Treaty (17 July 2025), which includes a mutual-assistance clause (Art. 3) and an entry-into-force provision via ratification (Art. 30). The Trinity House Agreement (23 October 2024), in turn, serves as the sectoral defence accord anchoring implementation across multiple domains. Regarding governance density, the Italy–Germany Action Plan establishes several dialogue formats (e.g., 2+2 foreign and defence meetings, a macroeconomic forum), but it does not introduce a dedicated joint governance architecture for defence-industrial programmes. Follow-up between the two countries is channelled through "existing mechanisms" and the Strategic Dialogue on Defence—a comparatively light process when contrasted with the formal committee structures typical of treaty-based cooperation. By contrast, the Kensington Treaty outlines seventeen concrete projects (a detailed delivery list) and links them to a biennial Implementation Plan composed of recurring outputs and review cycles, designed to ensure a high degree of projectisation. The Trinity House Agreement further reinforces this framework by adding a defence

governance architecture and issuing joint communiqués to mark key milestones (e.g., the Deep Precision Strike programme). Collectively, this hard-law model seeks to institutionalise a dense, time-bound, and results-oriented governance structure. Finally, the Italy–Germany Action Plan, as a soft-law instrument, references several ongoing multinational programmes but does not itself introduce new co-funding schemes or production lines. The most concrete industrial step between the two countries during this period lies outside the framework of the Action Plan: the Leonardo–Rheinmetall 50:50 joint venture for the Armoured Infantry Combat System (AICS)/Main Battle Tank (MBT), headquartered in Rome with operations in La Spezia, which became operational in Q1 2025. This represents a tangible move toward industrial integration, yet it remains grounded in corporate instruments and national decisions rather than Action Plan governance. In contrast, the UK–Germany hard-law framework explicitly embeds industrial commitments within its legal architecture. The inclusion of multiple joint projects marks a clear shift from declaratory coordination to the materialisation of bilateral defence industrialism. Here, industrial cooperation functions as a core instrument of strategic alignment, linking political commitments to structured mechanisms of co-production and capability development. This industrial dimension enhances the treaty's operational credibility: by institutionalising procurement and production processes, it converts bilateral intent into enforceable interdependence.

5. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of bilateral cooperation frameworks in Europe highlights a tension between legal rigidity and adaptive flexibility as competing logics for advancing defence-industrial integration. The Italy–Germany Action Plan exemplifies a soft-law or mixed approach—anchored in political dialogue, open-ended coordination, and alignment with EU and NATO architectures. Its flexibility allows rapid policy convergence, integration of pre-existing programmes, and the creation of industrial partnerships such as Leonardo–Rheinmetall, without the institutional or political costs of formal ratification. Yet this same openness limits its enforcement capacity and long-term predictability, leaving implementation dependent on the political will of the parties and the inertia of existing mechanisms. Conversely, the Kensington Treaty and Trinity House Agreement between the UK and Germany embody a hard-law model that operationalises strategic intent through legally binding commitments, ratified enforcement clauses, and structured governance. Their dense institutional architecture—anchored in periodic implementation plans, sectoral councils, and specific deliverables—creates procedural certainty and accountability. By institutionalising co-production and co-procurement, the agreements link political convergence with material industrial interdependence, thereby transforming bilateral cooperation into a driver of capability consolidation. The two models therefore reflect complementary modes of effectiveness. Soft-law frameworks such as the IT–DE Action Plan are most effective in early-stage alignment, allowing experimentation and multi-level coordination within the broader EU ecosystem. Hard-law treaties such as Kensington–Trinity, by contrast, are suited to the consolidation phase, where political trust and strategic priorities have matured into enforceable industrial commitments. In a fragmented European landscape, both logics serve distinct but mutually reinforcing purposes: the former sustains agility and inclusiveness; the latter provides durability and credibility. The challenge for European defence industrial policy is thus not to privilege one over the other, but to engineer an adaptive continuum—where soft-law diplomacy incubates cooperation, and hard-law instruments secure its long-term institutionalisation and industrial delivery.

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About the Article

Main Question: How is NATO adapting to transnational threats through hybrid partnerships and networked security? Argument: NATO expands beyond treaty-bound members via the Partners Across the Globe framework, collaborating with Indo-Pacific Four in cyber, maritime, and capacity-building missions. Conclusion: NATO's evolution from alliance to flexible, networked security actor demonstrates that contribution and interoperability, rather than formal membership, define modern collective defence.

About the Author

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1. Introduction: From Alliance to Network

The shifting security landscape of the past few years – from the war in Ukraine to rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific – has pushed NATO to rethink the limits of its traditional, treaty-bound structure. The 1949-conceived Alliance now operates in a world where threats are no longer confined by geography or formal alliances: cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and maritime disputes transcend borders with ease, revealing the inadequacy of rigid institutional boundaries in an era of fluid, interconnected security. This evolving pattern reflects the recognition that today's security challenges are transnational and cannot be contained within fixed geographic or institutional borders. In this context, NATO's expanding network of partnerships represents more than pragmatic adaptation: it is a testing ground for a hybrid model of cooperation that blends the credibility of a formal alliance with the flexibility of ad hoc coalitions. Increasingly, the Alliance engages with non-member partners such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Colombia – the so-called Indo-Pacific Four (IP4) – integrating them into operations, exercises, and policy coordination without extending full and formal membership. Through its Partners Across the Globe framework, NATO has institutionalised this outreach, enabling cooperation with distant partners on missions, training, and strategic dialogue while avoiding the political and legal complexities of enlargement. The partnership with Australia is emblematic: Canberra has contributed to NATO-led operations in Afghanistan and maritime security missions, demonstrating how collaboration can deepen even outside the boundaries of formal accession.

Examining this shift reveals how NATO is positioning itself for an era of fluid, interconnected threats while raising crucial questions about legitimacy, decision-making, and strategic coherence.

2. Beyond Article 5: Redefining Cooperation

2.1. The Limits of the Traditional Model

For most of its history, NATO's strength and power lay in its simplicity: the mutual defence clause – Article 5 – which offered certainty, deterrence, and trust. Yet this clarity came with rigidity, in this way confining the Alliance both geographically to the North Atlantic area and institutionally to its signatories. In the 21st century, however, that framework has grown increasingly inadequate, as security has become globalised, multidimensional and, mostly, unpredictable: for instance, cyberattacks can cripple a member's infrastructure without crossing borders; while disinformation campaigns can target societies from thousands of kilometres away. NATO's original mechanisms were clearly never designed for such diffuse and hybrid threats, forcing the Alliance to adapt beyond its conventional architecture.

2.2. Partners Across the Globe: From Defence to Resilience

In response, NATO has established the Partners Across the Globe framework – a mechanism allowing cooperation with non-member countries based on one common ground: shared security and strategic concerns. Through Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programmes (IPCPs), the Alliance engages partners in training, joint missions and technology exchanges without extending formal membership and, indirectly, the deriving obligations. Australia's participation exemplifies this approach, as Canberra's involvement in NATO-led operations in Afghanistan and in maritime security initiatives apparently illustrates how collaboration can evolve outside the boundaries of accession. These partnerships highlight mainly a conceptual transition: from collective defence to collective resilience. This means NATO is no longer only guarding borders; it is indeed strengthening systems, capabilities, and norms. The Alliance is becoming not a gatekeeper of security, but more a convener of capacities and a hub that connects rather than confines.

3. The Indo-Pacific Connection

The so-called Indo-Pacific Four (Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand) represent NATO's most dynamic set of external partnerships. Although geographically distant, these states share NATO's democratic values and its concerns about strategic instability, particularly regarding China's growing assertiveness and North Korea's accelerating militarisation. As the Indo-Pacific gradually becomes the world's geopolitical and geoeconomic epicentre, both states and regional organisations have begun to pivot toward it: for NATO and its members, engagement in the region reflects a combination of strategic, economic, and normative drivers – from U.S. pressure and alliance coordination to market opportunities and shared security concerns. This pivot has intensified cooperation between European and Indo-Pacific actors under Washington's broader leadership, though recent transatlantic tensions, particularly over burden-sharing and the war in Ukraine, are testing this alignment. Within this evolving environment, NATO's Indo-Pacific partnerships embody both opportunity and constraint, as the IP4 are all formal U.S. allies, but their priorities and capacities vary:

- Australia stands as one of Washington's most reliable regional partners, with significant defence spending and experience in joint operations. Its status as a NATO "Enhanced Opportunities Partner" and its cooperation in Afghanistan and the Indian Ocean illustrate how Canberra's engagement could deepen further, though always within the limits of U.S. strategic approval;

- Japan, where the modern notion of the "Indo-Pacific" originated, combines strong alignment with Washington and high technological capabilities, albeit constrained by constitutional limits on military deployment;

- South Korea, caught between its economic interdependence with China and its defence reliance on the U.S., has nonetheless increased cooperation with NATO, notably through the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn;

- New Zealand, though less exposed to direct threats, has contributed to NATO missions in the Balkans and Afghanistan, and focuses on technology and capacity-building, which are fields well-suited to low-intensity, cooperative engagement.

Recent years have thus seen a surge in concrete and diversified collaboration, as:

Figure 1: https://www.japantimes.co.jp/commentary/2024/10/29/japan/nato-ip4-europe-indo-pacific-security/

- Japan and NATO have deepened coordination on cybersecurity, with Tokyo joining exercises on critical infrastructure protection;
- South Korea contributes to the CCDCOE in Tallinn, bridging Euro-Atlantic and Asian cyber capacities;
- Australia participates in maritime security and next-generation technology initiatives;
- New Zealand focuses on non-traditional security areas such as resilience, capacity-building, and technological exchange.

These are not isolated initiatives but components of what analysts describe as a networked security architecture (Wilkins, 2023): a web of like-minded partners connected by shared values and interoperable systems rather than by binding treaties. Through this network, NATO extends its influence without extending its borders, bridging the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres. At the same time, the geopolitical balance underpinning these partnerships remains fragile, and this can apparently be witnessed in the 2° Trump administration, which is less aligned with traditional U.S. foreign policy pillars, raising uncertainty about Washington's role in coordinating transatlantic and Indo-Pacific security. This, combined with Europe's growing awareness of the region's strategic and economic significance, is gradually prompting European actors to adopt a more active Indo-Pacific posture. For NATO, this dual dynamic could evolve into a new form of "triangular cooperation", (Patalano & Locatelli, 2025) in which European, Indo-Pacific, and North American partners seek to maintain stability amid a more fragmented international order. Ultimately, NATO's engagement in the Indo-Pacific is not about enlargement or projection of power, but about relevance: it represents an attempt to shape the evolving global security architecture by linking democracies across regions, ensuring that the Alliance remains not only a Euro-Atlantic actor, but a global connector.

Hybrid Partnerships:
NATO's engagement with non-member states through operational, cyber, and strategic collaboration, creating networked security beyond formal treaties

4. Cyber Cooperation as a Laboratory for Hybrid Models

4.1. The Digital Domain: A Common Ground

Among all emerging domains, cyberspace best illustrates NATO's hybrid model in practice: digital threats are inherently transnational and challenge the very idea of territorial defence. Indeed, they demand rapid coordination, information exchange, and innovation – qualities that rigid alliance structures struggle to sustain.

4.2. The Tallinn Case Study

The Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) in Tallinn epitomises NATO's transformation from a territorial alliance to a networked security actor. The idea for such a centre predates Estonia's NATO membership: as early as 2003, Tallinn proposed the creation of a cyber defence hub to address emerging digital vulnerabilities. The 2006 Riga Summit had already listed cyberattacks among the "asymmetric threats" to collective security and called for long-term programs to strengthen information systems protection. A year later, in 2007, Estonia suffered a series of unprecedented cyberattacks that paralysed its government, banking and media infrastructure: these events marked a turning point for NATO, revealing that digital networks had become the new frontline of collective defence. In the wake of these attacks, the Alliance, with strong support from then–Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, approved a comprehensive NATO Policy on Cyber Defence in January 2008, followed by the official decision at the Bucharest Summit to establish a capability «to assist allied nations, upon request, to counter a cyberattack.» (Staff Writers, SpaceWar, 2008). As General James Mattis stated shortly before its creation (Brussels, 14 May 2008): «The need for a

cyber-defence centre to be opened today is compelling. It will help NATO defy and successfully counter the threats in this area.» Established in Tallinn later that year, the CCDCOE has since evolved into NATO's premier hub for cyber research, training, and joint exercises. It is one of 21 accredited Centres of Excellence (COEs) operating under NATO's Allied Command Transformation, funded through a mix of national and multinational contributions: its founding members (Estonia, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Spain) were soon joined by over twenty additional nations, including France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and several non-NATO countries. The centre's open membership policy has enabled the participation of partners such as Austria, Finland, Ireland, and, more recently, South Korea (2022) and Japan (2022), making it a genuinely transatlantic and transregional platform. The CCDCOE's mission extends well beyond training. It serves as a hub for interoperability within NATO's Network Enabled Capability (NNEC) environment, advancing doctrine development, operational testing, and legal analysis in the field of cyber defence. Its activities include (Tarien, 2018):

> **"NATO blends alliance credibility with flexible networks, engaging global partners to address cyber, hybrid, and transnational threats while maintaining strategic coherence"**

- improving joint readiness and interoperability through advanced simulations;
- developing NATO doctrines and standards for cyber operations;
- providing legal expertise on the use of force in cyberspace;
- and organising Locked Shields, the world's largest live-fire cyber defence exercise.

Within this framework, partners contribute analysts, technical expertise, and funding to collective projects that range from threat intelligence and capacity-building to the exploration of the legal and ethical dimensions of digital conflict. The 2022 admission of Ukraine as a contributing participant – only months after Russia's invasion – underscored the centre's growing role as a bridge between NATO and its wider strategic ecosystem. The Tallinn model demonstrates how effective security cooperation can emerge through functional integration rather than institutional accession. By anchoring collaboration in shared expertise and joint simulations, NATO has transformed the cyber domain into a laboratory for hybrid diplomacy – a setting where traditional boundaries between member and partner fade in favour of operational interdependence. In this space, solidarity is not declared through treaties, but demonstrated through practice: by testing, training, and trusting together.

5. Strategic Challenges and Political Dilemmas

5.1. The Question of Authority

NATO's hybrid partnerships, while innovative, raise profound questions about authority and legitimacy: non-member partners increasingly contribute troops, funding, and expertise, yet remain excluded from collective decision-making. This asymmetry can generate perceptions of "second-tier" participation (Fasola, 2024), weakening the sense of shared ownership on which alliances depend. As highlighted in several NATO's statements (AC24 Compendium, 2024), one of the key strategic challenges lies in defining "appropriate influence" for partners that participate in missions without the political rights of membership, denoting that this imbalance risks producing a gap between operational contribution and institutional voice. For NATO, maintaining inclusivity without eroding its decision-making autonomy thus remains a delicate balancing act – one that tests the very grammar of collective security in an era of networked cooperation.

5.2. Accountability and Oversight

Democratic accountability represents another sensitive frontier, as NATO's legitimacy rests not only on its capabilities but also on its identity as a community of democracies. Yet, the warning is that expanding defence cooperation without proper oversight "may weaken rather than strengthen security" (Grandi, 2025), especially when democratic standards among partners differ. When operations involve both member and non-member states, the chain of accountability becomes blurred: who bears political responsibility if a joint cyber operation fails, escalates, or breaches international law? These ambiguities risk undermining NATO's normative credibility, deriving from the idea that it not only protects democracy but also practises it through transparent decision-making and civilian control. To address this, analysts recommend reinforcing parliamentary scrutiny mechanisms and harmonising reporting standards across the partnership frameworks, ensuring that hybrid cooperation does not evolve into democratic exceptionalism.

5.3. Strategic Coherence

Expanding partnerships also complicates NATO's strategic coherence: the proliferation of frameworks – from the Partners Across the Globe initiative to enhanced bilateral ties – has created overlaps and inefficiencies that can dilute strategic priorities. Each partnership adds flexibility but also complexity, particularly when partners pursue their own regional agendas or maintain parallel commitments with other institutions. This can be identified as one of NATO's major dilemmas: the risk that "quantity substitutes for quality" in partnership management (Fasola, 2024). Without a unified assessment mechanism or clear prioritisation, the Alliance risks turning its cooperative network into a patchwork of uncoordinated engagements. At the same time, external perception matters, as closer coordination with Indo-Pacific partners has already drawn criticism from Beijing and Moscow, which frame NATO's outreach as an attempt to "globalise containment" (MOFA China, 2022-2024) While this misrepresents the Alliance's intent, it illustrates the geopolitical sensitivity of hybrid cooperation and the need for NATO to communicate its strategy consistently, avoiding the impression of strategic drift.

5.4. Balancing Openness and Integrity

We can understand that, ultimately, NATO's challenge lies in reconciling openness with integrity: the Alliance must evolve from "crisis-driven adaptation to structure-driven resilience" (Fasola, 2024). This requires institutionalising cooperation in a way that preserves cohesion, clarifies commitments, and maintains public trust. Too much rigidity risks irrelevance in a fast-moving strategic environment; too much openness risks fragmentation and incoherence. The future of NATO's credibility will depend on its ability to strike this equilibrium, ensuring that hybrid partnerships strengthen rather than dilute the Alliance's collective identity and strategic purpose.

6. Conclusion: A New Grammar of Cooperation

NATO's hybrid partnerships reflect more than pragmatic adjustment; they embody a deeper transformation in how international cooperation is conceived. The Alliance is evolving from a closed club of treaty-bound members into a flexible network of shared capabilities and trust.

By blending the structure of formal alliances with the adaptability of ad hoc coalitions, NATO is sketching the contours of a new diplomatic order. Its emerging model suggests that in a world of diffuse threats, collective security must be defined not by geography, but by connection. This is not the end of the Alliance model: it is through its reinvention. NATO's partnerships with non-member states show how old institutions can learn the language of a networked world, where cooperation depends less on belonging and more on contribution. If this experiment succeeds, it could redefine not only NATO's future, but the very grammar of global diplomacy.

Lastly, NATO's reinvention reminds us that true strength emerges not from rigid walls, but from flexible bonds that adapt as the world shifts beneath them. In such a networked age as the one we're living in, contribution matters more than belonging; security is a web of collaboration, spun by those willing to act beyond the lines that divide them.

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About the Article

Main Question: How can a small state like Ireland exert influence in the EU and globally? Argument: Ireland leverages multilateral institutions, normative leadership, and diplomatic specialisation to amplify influence. Conclusion: Through embedding in EU structures, principled stances, and diplomatic expertise, Ireland exemplifies effective small-state diplomacy and prepares for continued influence, including the 2026 EU Council presidency.

About the Author

Lauren Mc Hugh is a recent graduate of King's College London, where she studied History and International Relations. She has a strong interest in diplomatic affairs, particularly in how they are communicated through social media. Her academic and professional focus includes Irish foreign policy and the workings of the European Union. Beyond her core interests, Lauren also enjoys reading, horse-racing, and travelling. She is excited about immersing herself in the EPIS community!

1. Introduction

In international relations, small states are typically defined not solely by their physical size or population, but by their relative capacity to influence international outcomes compared to larger powers. A "small state", according to the United Nations, is generally considered to be a sovereign country with a population of under 10 million people, often facing unique vulnerabilities and engaging actively in multilateral diplomacy to protect its interests. (Súilleabháin, 2014). For this report, the small state definition must be expanded to include how small states can exert influence through strategic engagement in multilateral institutions, normative leadership, and diplomatic specialisation (Katzenstein, 1985; Thorhallsson, 2012).

2. Ireland as a Small State in the European Union

Given the return of great power competition and rising multipolarity, the role of small states deserves renewed attention. Despite its modest demographic and military size, Ireland has demonstrated a consistent commitment to multilateralism, international law, and human rights, while maintaining an active diplomatic presence both within the European Union (EU) and globally. Scholars such as Katzenstein (1985) and Thorhallsson (2012) identify three main strategies by which small states can be influential. Firstly, strategic engagement in multilateral institutions by embedding themselves in rule-based global and regional institutions to gain influence through norms and processes rather than raw power. Secondly, a normative leadership role by taking principled stances on human rights, international law, and multilateral cooperation can amplify moral authority. Finally, a diplomatic specialisation by investing in diplomacy and foreign policy expertise, developing niche capacities. This is especially evident during the Brexit negotiations from 2016 to 2019, which will highlight the highly effective contribution of Ireland towards a suitable solution for both its EU partners and the United Kingdom. Ireland joined the European Communities in 1973 and remains one of the EU's five 'neutral states', that is, it is not a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (European Commission). Academic scholarship on small state behaviour in international institutions, particularly the work of Peter Katzenstein (1985), posits that small states can maximise their influence by embedding themselves in rule-based international structures. Ireland has done precisely this within the EU, leveraging its status as a diplomatically active and normatively consistent small state to exert disproportionate influence as this report intends to highlight. A few recent examples of Ireland's contribution to EU policy and global diplomacy are its leadership during its presidency of the Council of the EU in 2013, where it played a pivotal role in advancing the EU's trade agenda, notably concluding a trade agreement with Singapore. Ireland also oversaw negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), demonstrating its capacity to broker consensus among larger and more divergent member states. Additionally, Ireland's term on the United Nations Security Council (2021–2022) exemplified its global diplomatic reach. During this tenure, Ireland co-chaired the negotiations on the Syrian humanitarian resolution and advocated strongly for the protection of civilians in conflict zones, illustrating how EU membership can amplify the global voice of a small state through coherence between national and Union-level foreign policy. In November 2022, Ireland's Tánaiste led a trade mission to Singapore, promoting Ireland's fintech and healthtech sectors. Over 100 Enterprise Ireland-supported companies export to Singapore; across ASEAN, this rises to 300 (Enterprise Ireland, 2023). This mission shows how Ireland uses its diplomatic structure to enable non-EU market access.

Small state diplomacy:
Influence exerted by states with limited material power through multilateral engagement, normative leadership, and diplomatic specialization

These examples show how Ireland uses institutional embedding (in EU trade policy), normative consistency such as upholding rules and standards in trade agreements, and diplomatic specialisation through targeted trade missions to exert influence far beyond what its size might suggest. However, there have been some limitations to small state diplomacy, specifically during times of crises. This is because small states tend not to possess the material capabilities or bargaining power that realists would argue is central to the exertion of influence in the international system. Professor Ben Tonra illustrate this using the Euro-Zone crisis from 2008-2014. Ireland, when confronted with a major economic contraction, was forced to reimagine its diplomatic priorities. Tonra analyses to what extent EU foreign policy coordination through the European External Action Service and the Lisbon Treaty played a role in Ireland's diplomacy during the crisis (Tonra, 2015,). This crisis demonstrated that EU-level coordination was slow, resulting in a more national strategy for Ireland to navigate the crisis. Ireland acted via its bilateral relations or directly with multilateral institutions rather than a coordinated EU policy approach. Ireland's experience confirms that, during high-stakes moments, small states must retain the capacity for independent diplomatic initiative. Therefore, for small states, national capacity remains essential and diplomatic strategy must be dual level. For Ireland, and small states more broadly, this dual strategy remains essential for navigating an increasingly complex and multipolar international system. In the final section of this argument, I build the case for Ireland's autonomous role against the backdrop of the Brexit referendum in 2016 and its high-level coordination with the EU in the negotiation process. This case study presents a strong argument that refutes the claim that there are limits to small state diplomacy during crises.

> **"Ireland maximizes its influence by embedding in EU institutions, leading on norms, and applying diplomatic expertise, proving small states can shape major international outcomes"**

2. Ireland as a Small State Success Story in the EU

The decision for Britain to leave the European Union in 2016 triggered a diplomatic, economic and arguably social crisis for Ireland, their nearest neighbour. The argument that follows is a comparison with the Euro-Zone crisis and illustrates Ireland's strategic use of its small state capacity to protect its interests. Given this, it provides a crucial case study in the strength, influence and importance of small states in the EU. Ireland pursued a robust, highly effective policy to ensure that Brexit would not result in Irish isolationism at the EU level. It is crucial to note that Ireland pursued a dual strategy of 'seeking shelter' and 'hedging' (Murphy, 2022, p593). The latter involved the 'development and prioritisation' of Irish relations with Germany and France (Murphy, 2022, p594). However, it was also helpful that Ireland's case aligned with what the EU wished to demonstrate to the UK: there was a difference between non-membership. As such, the solidarity between Ireland and the EU on this issue sent a very powerful message to other small states in the EU: membership matters no matter your size or material capabilities. The concerns of the Irish border were adopted by the EU 26 as a 'European issue', solidifying the collective response to this unprecedented occurrence (Laffan, 2019, p13). This was followed by rhetoric on a European and national level within Ireland. This can be summarised by the President of the EU Council, Donald Tusk comments in relation to the hard border issue: "Let me say very clearly: If the UK offer is unacceptable for Ireland, it will also be unacceptable for the EU" (Tusk, 2017). Furthermore, the rhetoric from Irish politicians has also followed this trend of exercising strength during this crisis. The Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simon

Figure 1: Flags of Ireland, The Eropean Union, and the United Kingdom – Source: [1] References

Coveney, characterised Ireland as a rule-maker rather than a rule-taker in Brussels. Given this, Ireland strengthened its diplomatic agenda and presence within the EU framework regardless of its 'small state capacity'. Additionally, the Irish Permanent Representation to the EU is the country's largest overseas mission (O'Donoghue, 2025). As such, Ireland seeks to influence predominantly through diplomatic efforts to make up for its limited material capabilities. The advent of the Brexit referendum in 2016 signalled Ireland's reliance on the EU for protecting its economic, security and societal interests (Murphy, 2023). The "seeking shelter" narrative discussed by Wivel and Thorallsson in the 'face of a multi-dimensional threat' can be applied to Ireland in this situation (Murphy, 2023, p. 594). Ireland's response to Brexit demonstrated its commitment and loyalty to the EU in a resolute recognition that Ireland's future lay within the EU. This case study offers a unique example of how Ireland mobilised its negotiating leverage in Brussels in what was described as an 'unparalleled diplomatic effort' from the Irish government (O'Brennan, 2019, p. 5). Murphy argues that Brexit 'effectively persuaded the Irish government that small states can influence EU policies and decisions' (Murphy, 2023, p. 599). This was largely due to the readiness and multi-pronged approach by the Irish government to place its interests at the centre of the issue from the very beginning. This was displayed by the reactive measures by the Irish government, as one day after the referendum on June 24th, 2016, they published 'An Initial Brexit contingency framework'. This document included a list of key actions, an immediate priority for Ireland, which included the reassurance to other EU member states that 'there is no ambiguity in relation to Ireland's status and ongoing commitment as a Member of the EU' (Contingency Action Plan Update, 2019, p. 3) through extensive communication measures in Ireland's embassies across Europe. Ireland's actions during the Brexit crisis, in comparison to the Euro-Zone crisis, build on Tonra's description of the Europeanisation of Irish foreign policy (Tonra, 2015). He defines it as a transformation in the way in which national foreign policies are constructed; professional roles are defined and pursued, and in the consequent internalisation of norms and expectations arising from a complex system of collective European policy making (Tonra, 2000). Given this, it helps us to understand how a common European framework was adopted

in response to the Brexit crisis with Ireland. Building on the effects of the financial crisis, Ireland was adopting a more muscular national economic policy in Europe, which required a deeper understanding of Irish foreign policy. Therefore, 'The Global Island: Ireland's Foreign Policy for a Changing World' by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2015, was published alongside the expansion of the diplomatic ecosystem to deal with the threat of Brexit by exerting Irish interests across the EU, as a committed member state. Murphy argues that Ireland, in the aftermath of Brexit, had to reposition itself as a 'good European' to effectively manage the fallout from Brexit (Murphy, 2023, p. 3). To do this, Ireland strengthened its position through the 'Global Ireland' strategy, launched in 2018. It aimed at deepening Ireland's diplomatic, trade and cultural presence on the European and international stage. This has warranted increasing economic success for Ireland within the EU. In 2024, they currently rank second for GDP per capita, with a 111% above the EU average (Eurostat, June 2025 Data). Notably, Luxembourg recorded the highest level of GDP among other small states, indicating that this is a positive trend of its capacity to exceed economic expectations.

3. Ireland's Future Role

Ireland is set to take the Presidency of the Council of the EU in July 2026 for the eighth time. This role will allow Ireland to chair over 170 Council preparatory bodies and committees, host over 230 Presidency events, and influence agenda formation. It comes at a time when the geopolitical context is constantly changing, and the European role has been called into question in the global role. This is an opportunity for Ireland, as a small state, to utilise its soft power levers and diplomacy to bolster the EU in international affairs. The role of the presidency brings politicians and civil servants from EU member states into the heart of the Union's politics, allowing them to shape policy throughout the six-month tenure. Interestingly, there is no distinction made between larger and smaller state presidencies. However, the capacity of small states has been called into question, emphasising the lack of administrative resources and diplomatic reach to run the presidency properly, but there is no evidence to support this claim (Laffan, 1997). The opportunity to have a rotating presidency every six months validates the contribution that small states make within the EU and their effectiveness.

In the aftermath of the Brexit referendum and negotiations that Ireland has managed to deal with this historic change relatively well. Importantly, Northern Ireland voted by 56 per cent to Remain in the EU (Directorate General for Internal Policies, 2017, p. 9). The EU played a key role in resolving the Irish border issue through the Northern Ireland Protocol. This allowed for Northern Ireland, which is on the island of Ireland, to remain in the EU Single Market and Customs Union, avoiding the return to the hard border in Ireland. This report could be further strengthened by a deep analysis of the implications of Brexit on the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 to emphasise that when Irish interests were directly threatened, its government strongly responded both at a national level and with its EU partners.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Ireland has been a committed member-state throughout its 50-year membership. Going forward, the Irish presidency of the EU Council in 2026 will be a critical test of how far small states can shape EU policy agendas. Future research should assess the outcomes of this presidency, especially examining whether Ireland can leverage it to advance both its national goals and the broader EU commitment to multilateralism and values.

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About the Interview

Main Question: How do minilateral arrangements shape East Asian cooperation? Argument: Forums like ASEAN provide broad frameworks, while minilaterals (Quad, trilateral dialogues) enable focused security cooperation alongside economic ties to China and reliance on the U.S. Conclusion: Minilaterals complement larger institutions, offering flexible, pragmatic, and targeted regional cooperation.

About the Interviewer

Valentin Grangier is a French student of International Relations at Leiden University, currently on exchange at the University of Tokyo. Specialising in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific, he focuses on geopolitics, security, and regional dynamics, analysing power interplay, ASEAN's role, and shifting alliances. Passionate about Japan and proficient in intermediate Japanese, he blends constructivist, realist, liberal, and democratic perspectives to explore the region's political, economic, and security challenges.

About the Interviewee

Prof. Dr. Felix Kuhn received his PhD in Political Science from the National University of Singapore in 2019. After several years of teaching at the Beijing Foreign Studies University–Keele University Collaborative Programme on Diplomacy, he joined the University of Tokyo in 2023. His teaching and research focus on historical and contemporary Japanese foreign relations and the practice of diplomacy.

Valentin Grangier:

All right, let's start with an East Asia focus. The first question is about the evolution of regional cooperation in East Asia. We've witnessed a proliferation of many lateral arrangements, such as the Quad, the Asian Plus frameworks, and trilateral dialogues like Japan, South Korea, and China. Do you see these smaller, issue-focused groupings as a sustainable regional model for diplomacy, or are they more like temporary responses to the limitations of broader institutions like APEC?

Prof. Felix Kuhn:

Well, the broader organisations do exist. As you mentioned, there's ASEAN and APEC. You can also include the East Asia Summit. The East Asia Summit is not minilateral; it's more of a general framework where countries come together and cooperate. The emergence of several minilateral arrangements, such as the Quad, reflects a perception among some countries that existing arrangements do not fully cover all the needs they feel should be addressed, especially in the security sphere. ASEAN and the East Asia Summit were originally intended for all countries to come together, discuss, and coordinate, including on non-traditional security threats. This model hasn't been discarded. It still exists and retains its value, as we can see in periodic ASEAN-centric gatherings. However, some countries feel that deeper security cooperation is necessary. For example, in the Quad, Japan, India, Australia, and the United States recognise the need for enhanced collaboration, especially in the security domain. From the Japanese perspective, this is largely about China. There is still a desire to cooperate with China where possible, particularly economically, but deeper security cooperation is also seen as very necessary. Japan's approach builds on bilateral relations, especially its security alliance with the United States, as a foundation. On that basis, Japan pursues deeper cooperation with other countries. This is not limited to the Quad; it is also evident in trilateral U.S.-South Korea-Japan cooperation and U.S.-Japan-Philippines collaboration. Much of this is rooted in the original hub-and-spoke system of U.S. security alliances, where the United States has agreements with individual countries, but those countries do not have security alliances with each other. The Quad is somewhat unique because it attempts to draw in India without establishing a formal military alliance, allowing for cooperation without engaging in a complete security alliance.

Minilateralism:
Small, flexible, issue-focused diplomatic or security arrangements complementing broader regional institutions

Valentin Grangier:

Thank you. Now, let's discuss what defines the success of the East Asian cooperation model. From your perspective, what constitutes a successful model? Are there region-specific principles, such as non-interference or informal consensus-building, or is it more about shared development goals underpinning durable, trust-based frameworks in East Asia?

Prof. Felix Kuhn:

That depends on the framework. ASEAN-centric frameworks are often associated with principles like non-interference and informal consensus-building, known as the "ASEAN Way." The idea is to engage in general discussion and coordination without forcing compliance.

In trilateral or mini-lateral frameworks focused on security, the approach is different. There is no intention to interfere in another country's internal affairs, like North Korea or China, but the cooperation is targeted and action-oriented. From a Chinese perspective, mini-lateral initiatives are often criticised as exclusivist. Indeed, by definition, minilaterals are exclusive, but that doesn't make them wrong. China itself engages in minilateral arrangements, for example, recent military exercises with Iran and Russia. However, such arrangements are viewed critically from the U.S. or Japanese perspective. From a regional perspective, minilaterals can appear fragmentary. But

from the participating countries' perspective, there are legitimate strategic reasons to engage in them. Outside these minilaterals, arrangements can sometimes appear less cooperative and more like negative models.

Valentin Grangier:

Let's talk about culture and shared traditions. Asia has shared Confucian traditions, hierarchical norms, and historical legacies. To what extent do these cultural and historical factors facilitate or constrain cooperation, particularly between countries with complex pasts like Japan, China, and South Korea?

Prof. Felix Kuhn:

If we take Japan as an example, these traditions are not conspicuous. Today, when Japan talks about values in cooperation, it emphasises liberal values: democracy, free trade, human rights, and free speech. This does not mean Japan only cooperates with countries that share these values. Japan has strong relations with Vietnam, for example, where liberal democratic norms are less prominent. Concerns with China focus on its authoritarian nature rather than Confucian values. Traditional cultural influences may have a subtle effect, but current political and strategic values dominate diplomatic interactions.

> **"East Asian minilateral initiatives, like the Quad, balance security needs and economic interdependence, showing how targeted cooperation complements broader frameworks"**

Valentin Grangier:

Focusing on Japan, given China's rapid advancement in sectors such as electric vehicles, semiconductors, and green technologies—areas where Japan has traditionally been strong—how has this competition reshaped the economic and diplomatic relationship between Tokyo and Beijing? Is the rivalry overshadowing interdependence, or does it drive new forms of pragmatic engagement?

Prof. Felix Kuhn:

It depends on the sector. For example, Chinese EVs have not yet made a major impact on the Japanese domestic market. The EV market is still smaller than that for hybrid models, and while companies like BYD have made inroads, their impact on Japanese sales is minimal. The broader economic relationship remains vital. China is an essential partner for Japan, both as a market and as a production location. Competitive dynamics exist, especially in Southeast Asia, but the economic relationship continues to be important for both sides. Japan also considers its economic security, such as in the area of rare earths. China imposed restrictions on exports to Japan over a decade ago, and Japan has been developing alternative sources and strategies. Economic rivalry exists alongside ongoing pragmatic engagement.

Valentin Grangier:

Considering economic interdependence between China, Japan, and South Korea, could Japan or South Korea recalibrate their security posture toward China out of economic necessity, or are U.S. security commitments too deeply institutionalised to allow such flexibility?

Prof. Felix Kuhn:

Let me focus on Japan. Japan has tried to balance economic interdependence with its security alliance with the U.S. It will not give up the American alliance for deeper economic engagement with China. Every Japanese prime minister in the past decades has emphasised that the U.S. alliance is the bedrock of Japanese security. China is a significant security issue, and Japan will not make itself more dependent on China for economic reasons. Economic cooperation is desired, but it will not override strategic priorities. Even with instability in U.S. politics, Japan maintains the alliance as a foundation. During the first
Trump administration, Prime Minister Abe worked closely with the U.S. Future governments are expected to follow the same path, seeking close cooperation with Washington regardless of who is president.

Valentin Grangier:

Now, regarding South Korea and Japan, South Korea is expanding its defence posture. Could Tokyo and Seoul develop a framework for regional defence cooperation, despite their historical tensions and their respective alliances with the U.S.?

Prof. Felix Kuhn:

In theory, yes. The U.S. hopes for closer cooperation between its allies. Historical issues have sometimes limited collaboration, but there is a visible effort from both sides to enhance security cooperation, particularly in the context of China and North Korea. Future developments depend on how the new leadership, especially Prime Minister Takaichi, handles sensitive historical issues like visits to Yasukuni Shrine. The comfort women issue also remains unresolved from South Korea's perspective, despite Japan's claim that it has been addressed. Cooperation is possible, but historical and popular issues could disrupt progress.

Valentin Grangier:

Finally, let's discuss Europe's engagement with the Indo-Pacific. How do East Asian policymakers, particularly in Japan, South Korea, and China, interpret Europe's growing involvement? Is the EU's strategy seen as a stabilising force, or as an external factor complicating intra-Asian strategic balancing?

Prof. Felix Kuhn:

It depends on whom you ask. Japan welcomes European involvement and has frequent security dialogues with the EU and individual European countries like Germany and France. Security initiatives, such as sending ships to the Indo-Pacific, are also welcomed. China, however, does not view it positively. While it does not necessarily obstruct EU-China cooperation, European engagement in security is less welcomed than in Japan. In general, there is no single East Asian perspective. Countries maintain different approaches to security. Many Southeast Asian countries hedge and avoid taking sides. Japan does not see China as an all-out enemy but recognises it as a security challenge. China, in turn, sees the U.S. and its alliances as a security challenge.

Valentin Grangier:

Thank you very much for participating in this interview.

Prof. Felix Kuhn:

Thank you. The questions were very timely and relevant.

About the Interview

Main question: How should Europe respond to China's coercion toward Taiwan? Argument: China portrays Taiwan as a domestic issue, while Europe increasingly recognizes its strategic and economic interests in the Indo-Pacific. Conclusion: Europe must engage more actively to defend the status quo and international order.

About the Interviewer

Lovely Bernardo holds a Juris Doctor degree and is currently pursuing postgraduate studies in International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law. Formerly Division Chief in the Philippine Executive Department, she led policy initiatives on legal and governance issues. Her thesis explores how China's use of quantum sensing in the South China Sea constitutes strategic legal erosion, bypassing armed conflict yet undermining sovereignty and international law.

About the Interviewee

Dr. François Chihchung Wu is a Taiwanese political scientist and diplomat. He earned a Ph.D. in political science from Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University. He has served as Taiwan's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and as Representative to France, and previously taught at Soochow University. His work focuses on geopolitics, diplomacy, and Taiwan–Europe relations.

Lovely Bernardo:

Mr. Wu, let me start with the non-kinetic coercion and non-linear coercion that is happening now. We are also concerned about the South Asian Continent. Our group is focusing on Europe, but we are seeing what China is actually doing with non-kinetic coercion, trying to twist the law fair. What do you think will happen in the next future?

Dr. Wu:

Basically, I see the principal objective of China and their narrative concerning Taiwan to let the world believe that Taiwan is a domestic problem of China. When it becomes a domestic problem of China, like Hong Kong, in 1996, China signed with the UK signed an international treaty to protect the democracy of Hong Kong, so even Hong Kong was protected by an international treaty, China is still able to destroy the democracy of Hong Kong in 2019. They are trying to do the same thing against Taiwan. Putting Taiwan as a domestic affair, then foreign countries, or the international community will not be able to intervene if China uses force against Taiwan. In the community, they tend to believe that China is defending their traditional system, they are looking at the Philippines. So, the international court gave you reason in the South China sea, but the US never accepted China. It didn't serve Chinese interest immediately to transform the pressure with ... (2:00-2:15) and they tried to change the narrative and try to use the power of their country to obtain their own interest, that is the problem.

Non-kinetic coercion:
refers to the use of legal, informational, economic, and political tools—rather than military force—to pressure states, shape narratives, and achieve strategic objectives.

Lovely Bernardo:

Let me ask a second question. Dr. Wu, what do you think would be the share of Europe to Taiwan, like with this kind of informational tool that China is actually doing against? What would be the help of European nations?

Dr. Wu:

I think it is not a question that European countries helping Taiwan, it is now a huge common interest that we share in the region, meaning the status-quo, freedom of delegation. They are important interests that European countries also want to defend. If you just look at the last year, we have the coming of warships from the Netherlands, France, the UK, Germany and even from Turkey. The most interesting thing is that even Italy sent their aircraft carrier fleet in the region to cooperate with the Japanese navy, followed by the French air carrier and the British also. To send a fleet to the region is very far. Why are you doing so? European countries now fear that they have a very strong interest in the region. I think, again, it is not a question of who is assigning who, because Europe and Asia are very far apart. It's just a strong demonstration that, Europe now, has a really strong interest in the region and they are more naive, and they don't trust China can play a major role to defend a correct international order in the region so they need to do something themselves.

Lovely Bernardo:

What is your message to European policy students?

Dr. Wu:

I am visiting a major European capital. The Indo-Pacific now, is becoming one of the important centres of the world. So, European students need to pay more attention to it. I see that more than 60% of the continent of the world needs to close the Formosa strait, and for the biggest one, it is 80%. Another thing that concerns the future is the capability that Taiwan owns. We, in Taiwan, we produce in general 60%-70% of the semiconductor, for the most sophisticated machines is 95%, so, every kind of equipment that you are using for young European students, your mobile phone, your computer, your television, your vehicle, your aeroplane, and missile. The most significant thing

is that everyone wants to have very good health. When you go into the hospital, you want very good, advanced medical equipment to take care of your health. In every advanced medical equipment, you have chips made in Taiwan. So, Europe now has an interest in the region, so, you need to pay more attention to the interest in everything happening in the region. I encourage your European students to go more often to the region to go to the Philippines, Taiwan, Japan, Korea. You will find that it is something that concerns your career and future, and also because the countries all mentioned have a very strong will to work together for a sustainable future. Young people in Europe also should have a more political will to defend a sustainable future that I especially see in Taiwan, which we defend very strongly.

> **“China’s strategy to frame Taiwan as a domestic issue is a form of non-kinetic coercion aimed at deterring international intervention and reshaping the global security order.”**

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