

The
WORLD
between
**STILLNESS &
SUBLIMATION**

SABAB | VOLUME X
DEPARTMENT OF
POLITICAL SCIENCE

SABAB

2026

Department of Political Science
LADY SHRI RAM COLLEGE FOR WOMEN

Sabab is the annual academic journal of the Department of Political Science, Lady Shri Ram College for Women. In Urdu, the word Sabab means reason or cause. It implies the quest for the grounding of the abstract, the grasping of the metaphysical. Sabab publishes a compilation of imaginative, ambitious papers each year with the aim of encouraging critical thinking and meaningful engagement with the political phenomena around us.

Published in New Delhi
Department of Political Science
Lady Shri Ram College for Women Lajpat
Nagar- IV, New Delhi
Delhi- 110024
Ph- 011-26434459

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A Shreya Lakshmi & Suhani Singh

The world today is not at war everywhere, nor is it at peace anywhere. It is still, but still as a shaken puzzle board, its pieces scattered beneath a deceptively calm surface. Ukraine holds its breath. Gaza smoulders into a pause that tastes nothing like resolution. The South China Sea freezes in a stare-down of steel and sovereignty. This is the stillness this volume speaks of: not serenity, but suspension. The quiet after rupture. The silence before the next articulation. And yet. From this tense, unresolved quiet, something sublime. Not slowly. Not gently. But as in nature, a solid passes directly into a gas, skipping the liquid altogether. One day, a protest is a whisper. The next, Tehran and Kathmandu. One decade, a diaspora aches in borrowed languages. The next, it rewrites the canon. Sublimation is the moment the shaken puzzle reorders itself. It is the violence of hope becoming visible.

We are living inside the theme. The World between Stillness and Sublimation is the most political place you will ever stand, and we aren't mere observers.

World Order is constantly driven by ebbs and flows, by disruptions and reformations, by 'stillness(es) and sublimation(s)'.

We are glad to present Volume X of Sabab, focused on these themes, which have called upon many to ponder this year. Stillness in world affairs isn't just cessation of conflict, but a deeper brewing of the next stage itself. It provides time and space to consider and reconsider one's identities, memories, and apprehensions, leading to a liminal chance of 'change'. Sublimation, on the other hand, defined scientifically as vaporisation of a solid body, is metaphorically seen in international relations by disruptions that seem 'unexpected', 'undeterred' and 'sudden'.

It truly has the greatest potential for visibility of people's hopes and their choices. It is the final 'enlightenment' after the trials in silence end. Together, 'Stillness and Sublimation' present the debates that the world finds itself in, of careful silence or exploding desires. The stakeholders of this question- whether a citizen of neoliberal democracy, a displaced refugee, or the child of a war-torn 'nation'- each have their deliberation to make. Every institution, geopolitical disruption, identity question, and economic stance can be examined through this lens to determine its trajectory and that of the millions it promises to shield.

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SABAB

Volume X | 2026

The World Between

STILLNESS & SUBLIMATION

**The Annual Academic Journal
The Department of Political Science
Lady Shri Ram College for Women
New Delhi, India**

RESEARCH PAPERS

The Great African Coup Wave (2020–2023): Why the Region Looked “Stable” Until It Didn’t?

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Abstract

This paper explores the structural pressures that had been quietly building in West Africa during the 2010s – economic frustrations, political rifts among elites, weakening state institutions, growing youth dissatisfaction, and heavy dependence on external security actors. By looking beneath the surface of apparent “stability,” it argues that the coups of 2020–2023 were not sudden surprises, but outcomes that had been taking shape for years. This study relies exclusively on secondary data, using a qualitative comparative case study approach analysing Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger that have undergone similar and relevant coup cases during 2020-2023. The analysis draws on existing datasets (Afrobarometer, WGI ACLED), journal publications and articles. By synthesising these sources, this study aims to identify broader patterns of instability in the region.

Keywords: *West Africa, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, military rule, coups, political instability, institutional blind spots, democratic breakdown, comparative study*

1. Introduction

Throughout the 2010s, West Africa was portrayed as a region marked by apparent ‘stability’ – regular elections, constitutional continuity and consolidation of civilian rule. However, a series of abrupt military coups between 2020 and 2023 in the region shattered this illusion, spread

across countries like Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. The suddenness of these takeovers posed an important empirical question: Why did these coups erupt suddenly after a decade of apparent political stability?

Most explanations dismissed these coups as isolated incidents due to immediate challenges like civilian leadership failures and terrorism. While these factors are significant, they largely remain event-focused. They explain *how* coups unfolded, but not *why* political systems that seemed stable for years proved so vulnerable to rupture so suddenly.

This paper argues that the stability in West Africa functioned more as a surface-level masking of structural pressures. Drawing on the conceptual ideas of *stillness* and *sublimation*, we aim to explore how latent pressures gradually converted into a sudden political rupture. Accordingly, our primary research question asks: **“What structural pressures accumulated beneath the surface of political stillness in West Africa, leading to the coup wave of 2020–2023?”**

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on military coups, especially in West Africa, has explained the intervention of the military in a political capacity, despite the existence of a formal civilian government. The Structural Economy approach by Samuel Finer suggests that coups were symptoms of weak political institutions failing to limit or control military intervention (Finer,1962). This was corroborated by Powell and Thyne through the use of a global dataset of coups to demonstrate that regime instability, economic breakdown and previous attempts at coups considerably increase the plausibility of military takeovers and suspension of civilian-led governments (Powell and Thyne,2011).

Additionally, the Insecurity Approach suggests that mounting insecurity among civilians eroded the legitimacy and credibility of civilian-led governments, leading locals to support the very idea of a coup, even if it did not translate into long-term peace (C Raleigh,2010). This created conditions in which military intervention in governance became ‘acceptable’ and in some cases

‘necessary’ while Huntington’s concept of objective civilian control highlights how weak professionalisation and politicisation of the military blur the boundary between civilian and military authority, focusing on the Elite Calculations approach (Huntington,1957). This paper, without entirely rejecting any approach, establishes an accommodative and cumulative approach to study coups, their history, level of success, influence on future politics and a framework to predict coups.

3. Conceptual Framework

3.1 Definition of Military Coups in Political Science Literature

A military coup d'état is defined as an “overt attempt by the military or other elites within the state to unseat the sitting head of state using unconstitutional means¹” A coup d'etat, according to Edward Luttwak's influential treatise, consists of "the infiltration of a small but critical segment of the state apparatus, which is then used to displace the government from its control of the remainder"². Building on this, Powell and Thyne (2011) identify three defining elements of coups: they are carried out by state elites (usually military officers), target the chief executive, and employ illegal means – thereby excluding mutinies, lawful removals, or non-executive challenges.

3.2 Coups as Structural Vulnerability Outcomes

Coups stem from accumulated structural pressures, not isolated triggers. As the IMF (2024) shows, economic distress, political instability, and security crises interact with institutional decay and inequality, overwhelming constitutional mechanisms. When structural pressures overwhelm civilian institutions, the arena of political resolution shifts toward the only institution capable of coercive coordination: the military.

3.3 The Military as an Institutional Actor

¹ Clayton L. Thyne and Jonathan M. Powell, “Coup d’état or Coup d’Autocracy? How Coups Impact Democratization, 1950–2008,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 2 (2016): 192–213.

² Glenn Harlan Reynolds, “Of Coups and the Constitution,” *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 48 (2017): 111–172.

According to Koehler and Albrecht (2021), in authoritarian endgames, “militaries become strategic actors” whose defection can decide regime outcomes, especially when fiscal crises undermine loyalty. As the only holders of legitimised coercion, militaries often remain the only actors capable of rapid coordination during regime crises.

3.4 Causal Logic: From Stillness to Rupture

This framework traces the shift from apparent stability to institutional breakdown. First, *stillness masks deterioration*: democratic forms persist while repression conceals decay and discontent. Second, *pressure accumulates* as economic, political, and security stresses build beneath the surface. Third, *institutional failure* emerges through rigged elections, weakened legislatures, and captured courts that block constitutional change. Fourth, elite splits and protests signal regime weakness, creating *military viability*. Finally, the *coup* releases the sublimated accumulated pressure, exposing the democratic breakdown that prolonged institutional stillness had concealed.

4. Why Africa Needs More Attention?

Africa is the second-largest continent after Asia, and it is also the second most populous continent in the world (after Asia). Many African nations struggle with internal conflicts, widespread poverty and corruption. Africa as a continent is often reduced to its resources, and African political crises are often oversimplified, portrayed as inevitable, conveniently ignoring historical legacies, external interventions and the role of local actors in shaping everyday governance. It stands as a quintessential case study to understand global phenomena like terrorism, migration flows and humanitarian crises. The paper explores how Africa has undergone fundamentalist violence, institutional decay and heavy dependence on external aid under the blanket of ‘apparent’ stability that collapsed under military domination.

5. Case Study 1: Mali

5.1 Background

Mali stands at the epicentre of West Africa’s post-2020 Coup Wave, as it was the ‘first domino’ of the wave. Long before soldiers marched into Bamako in August 2020, the state was already hollowing out from within while appearing as a long-standing ‘fragile democracy’ where

elections were held, and democratic institutions formally remained intact. Following the overthrow of Moussa Traoré in 1991, the adoption of a new constitution and the election of Alpha Oumar Konaré in 1992 marked a decisive break from military rule. Beneath this stillness and apparent electoral stability throughout the 2000s, civilian authority eroded, public trust declined, and the military re-emerged several times as a central political actor. The crises of 2012 exposed structural vulnerabilities and public distrust in governance patterns due to increasing northern insurgencies and the inability of the government to establish political order.

5.2 2012 Tuareg Rebellion & Resource Marginalisation

Mali adopted a multiparty constitution in 1992, marking democratic rule. However, The 2012 coup marks a turning point in Mali's history, linking the Tuareg rebellion, resource marginalisation, jihadist expansion and long-term crisis of the Malian army. The disparities in Mali's state capabilities exemplified a lack of equal investment and security in the northern region, while resources were concentrated in Bamako.³ The peace agreements signed in 1996 offered promises regarding resources, security, and autonomy; however, little or no effort was made to implement them. As of 2012, Mali's northern region remained one of the poorest areas in the world; with about half of the population living below the poverty line of US \$1.25 per day⁴, Largely due to periodic droughts experienced over the years in the 1970's-1980's and again in 2012, lack of employment opportunities with less than 5 % of employed workers holding quality jobs, which were largely concentrated in urban areas and unemployment rate rising to 32% in important cities like Timbuktu and Gao ⁵.

In 2011, following the fall of Gaddafi, a considerable amount of firearms and ammunition supplies flooded the Sahel region. Individuals whose livelihoods were adversely affected by the drought were attracted to armed groups to secure an alternative source of income. Moreover, it resulted in the destruction of the livelihoods of a large number of pastoralists in Mali, while al-Qaeda was able to take advantage of the smuggling networks and gained control over the

³ Clark, A., Baker, K.M., Imperato, P.J. "Mali." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 10, 2026. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mali>.

⁴ Review of *Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (GPRSP), 2012–17*. n.d. International Monetary Fund. <https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/002/2013/111/article-A003-en.xml?utm>.

⁵ Review of *Plan for the Sustainable Recovery of Mali 2013-2014*. n.d. International Monetary Fund. <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2013/cr13111.pdf?utm>.

strategically important town of Gao, home to a military base. Mali's armed forces also proved to be a hollow institution, receiving billions in foreign military aid but lacking basic equipment, training alignment and morale. In the wake of the 2012 crisis, Mali was often referred to as having returned to a state of restored constitutional order after electing Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in 2013 with the backing of the French military.⁶ However, this sense of stability was mostly cosmetic, relying on military and financial resources from outside nations. The structural issues - weak governance, corruption, marginality, and insecurity - that led to the 2012 collapse remained unaddressed.

5.3 Coup within a Coup (2020-2021)

The 2018 Presidential Election made institutional weaknesses apparent. On July 29, security concerns made the voting process impossible in over 600 polling stations.⁷ Security also became a concern, and despite the deployment of thousands of troops to act as additional security, nearly 500 polling stations could not open, and many eligible voters stayed away due to fears of violence. Institutional weaknesses in the political and economic circumstances of the country made military coups in 2020 and 2021 instances of power struggles.

Many Malians believed that elections no longer reflected popular will, turning democracy into formal proceduralism rather than an avenue for change. The Constitutional Court's decision to favour the ruling party in the 2020 elections convinced many citizens that institutional remedies were blocked, pushing political opposition out of formal channels and into mass street protests. Central Mali was experiencing an increase in violence involving farmers against herders and infiltration by fundamentalist groups in Northern and Central Mali. At the same time, the Keïta Government did not have the adaptive capability to effectively meet the challenge presented by this growing resource conflict or invest in local initiatives to resolve these problems. The

⁶ Hagberg, Sten, and Gabriella Körling. "Socio-Political Turmoil in Mali: The Public Debate Following the 'Coup d'État' on 22 March 2012." *Africa Spectrum* 47, no. 2/3 (2012): 111–25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23350453>.

⁷ VOA News. (2018, July 30). Mali says more than 700 polling stations were inoperable during the election. *Voice of America*. <https://www.voanews.com/a/mali-says-more-than-700-polling-stations-inoperable-during-election/4506134.html>

M5-RFP⁸ led protests in 2020 against the Keita government, blocking negotiations with ECOWAS and sustaining public unrest.

After the removal of Keita, a civilian-led transitional government was formed under pressure from ECOWAS with Bah N'Daw as interim president. Although the transition was formally civilian, the power remained in the hands of the military. The immediate trigger for the 2021 Coup within a coup was a cabinet reshuffle that removed key military officers from eminent positions without consulting the junta.⁹

5.4 The Recursive Mechanism of Coups

The coups d'état of Mali represent the persistence of a recurring political economy, sharing a commonality of promises from each military leader. In the case of Sanogo (2012) and Goïta (2020), they both spoke of freeing Mali from corruption and rescuing it from the elite's theft and security failures, but neither of these promises was fulfilled due to underlying structural deficits. The country's leadership structures replicated a similar pattern of elite networks, limited parliamentary oversight, and selective application of laws.

Mali's illusory stability during the periods of 1992-2012 and 2013-2020 masked an ever-increasing deficit in institutions. The government was able to conduct routine elections and maintain its perceived success whilst failing to establish accountable courts, professional armies, merit-based bureaucracies, or equitable regional infrastructure investment. This led to the loss of the state's institutional resilience during the periods of crisis. Thus, while coup d'états increasingly became the primary method of political change, military governments failed to deliver stability and instead encountered the same limitations that led to a loss of belief in civilian governance.

⁸ M5-RFP (Mouvement du 5 Juin - Rassemblement des Forces Patriotiques) is a key Malian opposition coalition that led massive protests in 2020 against then-President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK), contributing to his overthrow by a military coup. It indirectly facilitated the military's intervention in August 2020.

⁹ Reuters Staff. 2021. "Mali's Former Coup Chief Takes Power after Military Arrests President." *Reuters*, May 25, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/west-african-officials-head-mali-after-attempted-coup-2021-05-25/>.

6. Case Study 2: Burkina Faso

6.1 Background

Burkina Faso, a landlocked country in the Sahel region has experienced its fair share of military governments, coups, popular uprisings, political instability and economic breakdown. One of its most controversial rulers remains Blaise Compaore - leader of the CDP (Congress For Democracy and Progress). He established a semi-authoritarian system of governance and his reign lasted almost three decades, till 2014 - when his rule ended abruptly due to a popular uprising. Prior to 2015, the nation was widely identified as an ‘island of stability’¹⁰ by analysts and international institutions alike. However, during that time period, the Mossi country was a ticking time bomb - marred by Islamist insurgency, suppression of dissent and widespread poverty¹¹. Power was entrenched, and instability was rising, promptly ending the apparent stillness in the nation’s political structure.

6.2 The 2014 Popular Uprising and the Collapse of Compaoré’s Regime

October 2014 marks a turning point in Burkinabe politics. When Compaore sought to extend his astonishing twenty-seven-year reign through a constitutional amendment, the residents of Ouagadougou took to the streets surrounding the National Assembly, protesting against not only the amendment but also the very leader this amendment sought to empower. Akin to the Arab Spring, this uprising has been termed Burkina Faso’s very own “Black African Spring”.¹² Concerned about the military takeover by Yacouba Isaac Zida, the African Union threatened the military with sanctions if power was not transferred to a civilian-led government. In contrast, the Economic Community of West African States called on international players not to impose sanctions on the Upper Volta, citing dire conditions in the country. This contradiction alone shows disparity - both in the country’s domestic politics as well as regional institutions and their policies.

¹⁰ Haavik, Viljar, Morten Bøås, and Alessio Iocchi. “The End of Stability – How Burkina Faso Fell Apart.” *African Security* 15, no. 4 (October 2, 2022): 317–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2022.2128614>.

¹¹ Burkina Faso ranked 181 out of 187 countries in the UN Human Development Index 2014, with 46% of the population living below the poverty line, making it one of the poorest countries in the world

¹² ACCORD, “Burkina Faso – ACCORD,” March 7, 2016, <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/burkina-faso/>.

6.3 The Failed 2015 RSP Coup and the Reassertion of Civilian Resistance

In September 2015, the nation faced another crisis - an attempted coup d'état by the RSP (Regiment of Presidential Security). The RSP, an autonomous, historically violent and notorious military unit, detained the country's government. Over the previous few years, as well, the unit was involved in threatening the foundation of the country's seeming democratic structure. The condition of journalists and human rights defenders in the country was concerning, to say the least. In addition to the infamous killing of journalist Nibert Zongo in 1998¹³ Amnesty International also reported that the RSP assaulted journalists who were peacefully executing their investigative work. Dissidents regularly faced threats and intimidation, and radio stations were ransacked because they accommodated anti-military voices.¹⁴ These factors united the Burkinabe against RSP's coup through civil disobedience movements and trade union strikes covering the entire national territory. The RSP struggled to sustain control in the capital and also received pushback from the regional leaders who in turn had support from the locals.

Moreover, international backing or any hope of support from neighbours collapsed as the coup was condemned by the UN, AU and ECOWAS. The coup had failed and its general, Diendéré, said he 'regretted the coup' and that 'we do not talk about it' any longer.¹⁵ Due to these reasons, Hagberg explicitly frames 2015 as a reinforcement of the revolutionary-democratic moment, not its collapse.

6.4 Democratic Experiment Under Marc Kabore

Marc Kabore broke away from Campaore's party and co-founded the party called People's Movement for Progress (MPP) in 2014. Kabore became the country's first democratically elected leader after Campaore's rule, making him an influential figure in restoring democracy in the

¹³ Hagberg, Sten. "'Thousands of New Sankaras': Resistance and Struggle in Burkina Faso." *Africa Spectrum* 50, no. 3 (2015): 109–21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43941340>.

¹⁴ Voule, C. N. & International Service for Human Rights. (2017). *THE SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN BURKINA FASO*. https://ishr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/upr_briefing_paper_burkina_faso.pdf

¹⁵ Hagberg, Sten. "'Thousands of New Sankaras': Resistance and Struggle in Burkina Faso." *Africa Spectrum* 50, no. 3 (2015): 109–21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43941340>.

region. In 2016, the government quickly announced the PNDES¹⁶, a national project targeting economic and social development. While this led to some progress in areas like free healthcare, public polls revealed ubiquitous dissatisfaction with the government and its policies¹⁷. A major issue tarnishing the Kabore government's name was Islamist insurgency. Burkina Faso was ranked first in The Global Terrorism Index 2024, recording over 250 terrorist attacks and nearly 2000 terrorism-related deaths (between 2016 and 2021), which roughly accounts for one-quarter of such deaths around the world¹⁸. Major actors included Ansarul Islam, JNIM and ISGS¹⁹. The 2022 Afrobarometer surveys²⁰ reflect the volatile state of the nation, where precarity was omnipresent.

6.5 The 2022 Coups and the Consolidation of Junta Politics in Burkina Faso

On 24th of January 2022, a military junta led by Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandogo Damiba, announced on television that the army had ‘decided to put an end to the power of Roch Marc Christian Kaboré’²¹. Contrary to 2015, this coup did not receive resistance from the locals. Since 2017, over a million Burkinabe were internally displaced and more than 2200 people were killed in 2019-2020 in relation to conflicts that could not be prevented or controlled by Kabore’s government²². Since his re-election in 2020 (under massive internal displacement conditions), frustration among the Burkinabe has consistently risen along with insecurities regarding the ability of the government to control Islamist insurgency and other conflicts.²³ This specific coup

¹⁶ “Accueil,” Plan National De Développement Économique Et Social, n.d., <https://www.pndes.gov.bf/accueil>.

¹⁷ Stephen Quansah, “Young Burkinabè Voice Dissatisfaction With Their Country’s Direction, Government’s Performance,” *Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 994*, May 6, 2025, 1, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/AD994-Young-Burkinabe-voice-dissatisfaction-with-countrys-direction-Afrobarometer-5june25.pdf>

¹⁸ Pandit, P. (2025, April 3). *Ten countries most impacted by terrorism: GTI 2024*. Vision of Humanity. <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/10-countries-most-displacedimpacted-by-terrorism-gti-2024/>

¹⁹ Hagberg, Sten. “‘Thousands of New Sankaras’: Resistance and Struggle in Burkina Faso.” *Africa Spectrum* 50, no. 3 (2015): 109–21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43941340>.

²⁰ “Burkina Faso,” n.d., <https://www.afrobarometer.org/countries/burkina-faso/>.

²¹ Engels, Bettina. “Transition Now? Another *Coup d’état* in Burkina Faso.” *Review of African Political Economy* 49, no. 172 (2022): 315–26. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48676593>.

²² ACLED. “10 Conflicts to Worry About in 2022: The Sahel | Mid-Year Update | ACLED,” December 11, 2025. <https://acleddata.com/report/10-conflicts-worry-about-2022-sahel-mid-year-update>.

²³ Engels, Bettina. “Transition Now? Another *Coup d’état* in Burkina Faso.” *Review of African Political Economy* 49, no. 172 (2022): 315–26. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48676593>.

solidified the military's dominance, leaving little to no hope for the restoration of civilian-led governments

The year 2022 was the deadliest for the Upper Volta, with over 400 attacks perpetrated by the JNIM in the first half of the year²⁴. UNHCR's 2023 position paper highlighted that violence in Burkina Faso was the highest among the Sahel countries²⁵. These factors eventually led to increased dissatisfaction with Damiba's government, resulting in another sudden coup in September 2022. Captain Ibrahim Traore came to power and publicly announced the dissolution of Damiba's government, almost replicating the latter's own rise to power. As Captain Ibrahim Traoré stated, "Faced with the deteriorating situation, we tried several times to get Damiba to refocus the transition on the security question" (Traoré, 2022). Promptly after seizing control, Traore imposed a curfew, closed international borders, suspended all political and civil activities, and dissolved the transitional assembly. By 2025, Burkina Faso's security and humanitarian situation will have deteriorated further- the persistence of these crises underscores that the 2022 coups did not reverse instability but entrenched the structural failures that produced them.

7. Case Study 3: Niger

7.1 Background

The Republic of Niger presented a curious anomaly – a “democratic exception” – in West Africa's political landscape, which was repeatedly marked by military coups amid escalating jihadist tendencies and visible state collapse. Since its political independence in 1960, Niger has witnessed four military coups in 1974, 1996, 1999 and 2010, respectively. Under President Mahamadou Issoufou (2011-2021), Niger achieved the region's first civilian-to-civilian power transfer in 2021. However, Scholar Jean Schmitt's analysis revealed a fundamental paradox of Issoufou's rule: While he promised the Nigerien population an equal distribution of oil revenues

²⁴ ACLED. "10 Conflicts to Worry About in 2022: The Sahel | Mid-Year Update | ACLED," December 11, 2025. <https://acleddata.com/report/10-conflicts-worry-about-2022-sahel-mid-year-update>.

²⁵ It was reported that Burkina Faso authorities controlled an estimated 60% of national territory in 2022, with the remaining 40% held by non-state armed groups or contested. Approximately 668000 people were newly displaced in 2022.

for everyone to benefit, his political practices were strongly focused on the destruction of the political opposition and rewarding loyal political followers (Schritt 2021).

7.2 Defence Sector Corruption

In 2020, an arms procurement scandal exposed how Issoufou maintained military loyalty.²⁶ Additionally, Transparency International's Government Defence Integrity Index (GDI) ranked Niger in the bottom quarter of the GDI 2020. This corruption kept Issoufou in power by rewarding military elites and tying their loyalty directly to his patronage. This corruption, Tchiani's military intervention was driven by institutional self-preservation, not rising insecurity or corruption.

7.3 Jihadist Insurgencies

Jihadist violence under Issoufou showed a gradual upward trajectory. Jihadist activity first appeared as latent Boko Haram infiltration from Nigeria. However, from 2015, insurgencies intensified – Diffa came under constant attack when the border area was turned into a battlefield in early 2015 as an anti-terrorist coalition was formed by the armies of Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.²⁷ The frequency of attacks increased from 2016 18, and casualties continued to climb as military posts and civilians were targeted. From 2019-21, ISGS & JNIM violence spiked dramatically²⁸. ACLED data revealed consistent yearly increases in fatalities and attacks despite Issoufou's military spending and French - US support. This security paradox drove displacement.

7.4 Persistent Poverty despite Economic Growth

Economic developments under President Issoufou's Presidency led to a +16.1% growth of Niger's GDP per capita over the last decade, from \$477.3 in 2010 to \$553.9 in 2019.²⁹ However, GDP growth rates of 3-5% annually did little to lift the majority population out of poverty –

²⁶ An arms dealer funneled over \$130 million to purchase Russian weapons – the money never reaching Niger's security forces. A 2022 audit revealed an additional \$99 million in discrepancies.

²⁷ Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, "The Spread of Jihadist Insurrections in Niger and Nigeria: An Analysis Based on the Case of Boko Haram," in *Transnational Islam*, ed. Élodie Apard (Ibadan: IFRA-Nigeria, 2020)

²⁸ ISGS (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara), an IS-affiliated jihadist group since 2015, and JNIM (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin), an al-Qaeda coalition formed in 2017, both dramatically escalated violence in the Sahel from 2019-21 through attacks on forces and civilians.

²⁹ Mo Ibrahim Foundation, *Niger under Mahamadou Issoufou's Presidency* (London/Dakar: Mo Ibrahim Foundation, March 2021)

Niger ranked 189th in the Human Development Index (HDI) in 2019. Despite the surface-level achievements of his presidency, masked systemic failures kept eroding the institution from within.

7.5 Aid Dependence and Anti-French Resentment

The continued extraction of Niger's natural resources by the French became a centerpoint of nationalist grievance. France has long exerted a monopoly over Niger's uranium, which is among the highest in Africa. It has been fueling French nuclear power plants, lighting up a third of its light bulbs, while over 85% of Nigeriens lacked connection to the electricity grid.³⁰ Simultaneously, Issoufou's regime relied entirely on external financing³¹. This neo-colonial presence and Issoufou's complicity gradually led the population to reject and blame the influence of the French, and the 2023 junta's anti-French position represented a revival of a long-dormant public grievance.

7.6 Political Repression and Military Corruption

Issoufou used corruption and repression as dual mechanisms of control – the jailing of opposition leader Hama Amadou during the 2016 elections, using bribery to repress opposition groups and the revelation of the 2019 governmental audit of the loss of \$137 million due to procurement malpractice. Non-existence of civilian oversight and military accountability meant breaches of the Military Code were “only occasionally investigated” and “rarely prosecuted”. When Bazoum attempted anti-corruption prosecutions, he threatened the entire institutional structure that enabled military patronage – the foundation of Issoufou's “stillness”.

7.7 Bazoum's Presidency – Reform attempts that triggered rupture

Mohamed Bazoum assumed office in April 2021 with a commitment to reform the system. However, Issoufou-era corruption networks remained deeply embedded within the judiciary, prosecution, and military command, leaving Bazoum's anti-corruption drive without any real

³⁰ Vishal Kumar, “Niger to Nationalize Uranium to Wrest Control over Its Resource from France,” *Peoples Dispatch*, June 23, 2025

³¹ “About 40 percent of Niger's budgetary funding comes from France, the EU and other developmental partners” – Vishal Kumar, “Niger to Nationalize Uranium to Wrest Control over Its Resource from France,” *Peoples Dispatch*, June 23, 2025

enforcement capacity. The very institutions meant to ensure accountability were themselves compromised. Civil–military tensions further intensified this conflict. In 2017, as Interior Minister, Bazoum proposed dialogue with jihadist groups – an idea rejected by the National Security Council and viewed by the military as an attack on their professional authority. When he raised these ideas again as president, the military saw them not as practical policy changes but as civilian interference that weakened its authority.

The rupture came on July 25, 2023, when Bazoum announced plans to remove General Abdourahamane Tchiani, head of the Presidential Guard. This move threatened Issoufou-era patronage networks, from which Tchiani had benefited extensively. Facing retirement and loss of access to corruption rents, Tchiani mobilised loyal factions and seized power by July 26. While security conditions had indeed worsened – ACLED data shows jihadist fatalities doubling in border regions³² – the junta’s justification of governance and security failure masked elite power struggles. The coup was less a response to deteriorating conditions than a defensive reaction by threatened military networks.

7.8 Why "Stillness" Ruptured?

Issoufou achieved "stillness" through patronage-based institutional sublimation, converting potential pressure into latent elite factionalism and institutionalised corruption rather than overt rupture. When Bazoum attempted to dismantle these patronage networks in 2023, sublimated pressure erupted as institutional collapse. This distinction is critical: coups occur not inevitably from deterioration but when reforms threaten patronage-based elite consensus masked by apparent stability.

8. Analysis of Rupture

The following table systematically compares Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to illustrate how prolonged political stillness concealed accumulating structural pressures that ultimately produced divergent forms of rupture:

³² Héni Nsaibia and Jules Duhamel, “*Sahel 2021: Communal Wars, Broken Ceasefires, and Shifting Frontlines*,” *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)*, June 1 mobilised7, 2021, <https://acleddata.com/press/sahel-2021-communal-wars-broken-ceasefires-and-shifting-frontlines>

<i>Dimension of Comparison</i>	<i>Mali</i>	<i>Burkina Faso</i>	<i>Niger</i>
<i>Political Situation Before the Coup</i>	<i>Appeared politically stable, but elections did not resolve growing public dissatisfaction or governance problems.</i>	<i>Maintained formal democratic rule even as insecurity and state weakness increased sharply.</i>	<i>Viewed as a democratic success after 2021, though power remained concentrated among political elites.</i>
<i>Main Structural Problem</i>	<i>Long-term corruption and poor governance reduced trust in civilian leaders and institutions.</i>	<i>The state failed to protect citizens from violence or provide basic services, weakening civilian authority.</i>	<i>Institutional imbalance and elite competition created tension within the political system.</i>
<i>How Pressures Built Over Time</i>	<i>Public protests and frustration within the military grew together over several years.</i>	<i>Continuous military losses and public fear led to widespread loss of confidence in civilian rule.</i>	<i>Political tensions remained hidden within elite circles until they reached a breaking point.</i>
<i>Role of the Military</i>	<i>Soldiers turned against civilian leaders, arguing that the government had failed to support them.</i>	<i>Active-duty officers justified taking power by claiming civilian leaders had mismanaged the security crisis.</i>	<i>The presidential guard led the takeover and quickly gained support from the wider military.</i>
<i>Immediate Trigger</i>	<i>The 2020 mutiny against President Keïta was the final outcome of long-standing political failure.</i>	<i>The removal of President Kaboré in 2022 followed months of visible insecurity and government collapse.</i>	<i>The arrest of President Bazoum in 2023 ended a period of apparent political stability.</i>
<i>Public Response to the Coup</i>	<i>Many citizens initially supported the coup due to frustration with</i>	<i>Large sections of the public welcomed the coup as a response to</i>	<i>Public opinion was divided, though large pro-junta demonstrations</i>

	<i>corruption and insecurity.</i>	<i>state failure and foreign influence.</i>	<i>reflected strong anti-Western sentiment.</i>
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9. Prediction Framework: A Sequential Coup Vulnerability Assessment Framework (SCVAF)

9.1 Analytical Logic

This paper proposes a Sequential Coup Vulnerability Framework (SCVAF) to incorporate empirical findings from the three case studies of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger into an analytical and methodological framework for predicting coup risk. Instead of treating coups as outcomes of specific events, this tool conceptualises them as the last and final stage of a cumulative failure in which four structural dimensions - explored in the following sections- decay in an established sequence. Coup probability does not increase due to degradation of a single dimension, but when all critical thresholds within a short time period collapse, producing what this study calls the “rupture window”.

9.2 Core Variables and Observable Indicators

This framework looks at coup vulnerability through four analytically distinct but interconnected variables:

First, **Security Overreach** is calculated through consistent upward trends in insurgent attacks, military fatalities, territorial loss and displacement flows. In all the three cases, coups emerged when the state retained formal sovereignty but effectively lost control over large rural zones and could no longer protect its own forces.

Declining electoral credibility, politicisation of courts, bypassing of legislatures by the executive and Afrobarometer trust indicators capture the second indicator – **Institutional Hollowing**– which identifies the breakdown of constitutional conflict resolution.

Third, **Elite Fragmentation** is assessed through elite factionalism, political militarisation, exposure of defence corruption and patronage-networks reforms. It is a critical dimension for differentiating structural crises from coup opportunities.

Finally, **Societal Detachment** is measured through declining protest culture, rising acceptance of military rule in surveys and framing of coups as corrective instead of illegitimate acts in anti-elite discourses.

Thus, the framework shows that coups are not isolated events but rather a result of rupture due to structural pressures and elite-driven trigger events.

9.3 Predictive Application

Applied prospectively, the SCVAF accurately identifies high-risk environments when coup-enabling situations like the following are created:

- (i) security metrics show consistent degradation,
- (ii) institutional functioning plummets beyond public confidence thresholds,
- (iii) elite networks face local pushback due to unaccountability,
- (iv) social acceptability of non-state actors and unconstitutional external involvement rises.

When these conditions are fulfilled simultaneously, the framework anticipates entry into a rupture window in which even peripheral disturbances can lead to military intervention and capture.

The framework however, is intentionally bounded in scope and is careful not to claim deterministic forecasting or universal applicability. The analysis has prioritised the convergence of internal dynamics and pressures over the notable involvement of foreign actors like Russia, France etc. to ensure causal clarity and prevent dilution of the paper's argument. Consequently, the framework primarily applies to contexts where similar internal structural and political pressures converge rather than across all cases of perceived instability.

9. Limitations

Limitations associated with conducting research on military coups in West African countries exist at both the research level and the greater level of analysis regarding studying military coups; therefore, these limitations affect how we interpret and generalise about our study results. The research applies the use of secondary sources such as the Afrobarometer study, Africa Centre for Strategic Studies (ACSS), in an environment where the availability of data in regions hardest hit by insurgencies casts a considerable challenge to those who would like to undertake research in the political field of Africa in light of the aforementioned challenges of security restrictions and the capability of the required data analysis in the regions. Secondly, the application of the qualitative comparative study of the cases of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, it provides an in-depth analysis of the regions' political circumstances rather than an Africa-wide analysis that would help in identifying the necessary factors of the study.

However, recognising these constraints rather than detracting from the analysis and invalidating the investigation of coup triggers, actually puts these results in the larger context of challenges in coup research presented in the previous section.

10. Conclusion

This study argues that the Sahel coup wave is best understood as the rupture of long-accumulated structural, political and institutional pressures that were masked by an appearance of stability. Across Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, when the stillness that concealed hollowed institutions, militarised politics and eroding public trust could no longer be sublimated through electoral ritual, patronage or foreign backing, they found release through military power seizure. This pattern signals a wider continental warning and the inability of civilian institutions to provide either protection or material improvements in the face of uneven economic growth and service delivery failures, risks redirecting political competition from constitutional arenas to coercive power. The future of politics in West Africa will be determined significantly by the manner in which states address the underlying crisis of civilian capacity and legitimacy. Unless security provisions, economic inclusion, and institutional credibility close the gap to the level of societal expectation, the military will continue to have a structural advantage over constitutional politics

in the region. A reversal of the coup trend, therefore, requires a change in governance patterns. Without addressing structural weaknesses in governance, security, and development, regimes may change while fragility endures, leaving the region trapped between deceptive stability and recurring military rupture.

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Tracing the Historical and Political Roots of the Russia–Ukraine Conflict

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Abstract

This study examines the roots and aggressive character of the Russia–Ukraine conflict by analysing the critical roles of Soviet Legacies, competing Nationalist projects, and post-Cold War Geopolitics. that the conflict's foundations lie in the profoundly divergent national formation processes, tracing competing claims back to the medieval narratives surrounding Kievan Rus. Upon independence, Ukraine successfully adopted an inclusive Civic Nationalism, defining its "people" as citizens of all nationalities, directly challenging Moscow's failure to shed its imperial identity post-1991. The aggressive character of the conflict was amplified by post-Cold War geopolitical dynamics, particularly Moscow's perception of NATO and EU expansion as an encroachment on its strategic interests. Russian assertiveness leveraged Soviet legacies, such as exploiting economic dependencies and consistently denying Ukrainian historical traumas like the Holodomor, to maintain regional hegemony. Critically, the final, full-scale escalation was Vladimir Putin's personal belief, who saw Ukraine not as a sovereign partner but as an artificial "Anti-Russia." The research explains how Putin relied on deeply flawed historical myths to justify a war aimed at destroying Ukrainian identity and expanding a perceived historical sphere of influence. This comprehensive analysis offers a vital framework for understanding the deep-rooted historical and political conflict fueling the current crisis.

Keywords: *Cold War, NATO, Soviet Legacies, Nationalism, Imperialism, Russia-Ukraine*

Research Question

How have Soviet Legacies, Nationalism, and Cold War Geopolitics shaped the Roots and Character of the Russia–Ukraine conflict?

The Russia-Ukraine conflict is a decisive clash between Ukraine's post-Soviet pursuit of sovereign self-determination and Russia's persistent imperial identity. This fundamental clash is driven by three intersecting factors—Divergent Nationalisms, Soviet Legacies and Hegemony, and Geopolitical (post-Cold War) and Individual Triggers (Vladimir Putin's). The conflict represents Russia's attempt to restore a perceived sphere of influence by force, directly clashing with Ukraine's constitutional commitment to independent democracy. The paper thus suggests that the Russia-Ukraine conflict is not only shaped by recent NATO expansion but also has historical and political roots.

Introduction

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine represents one of the most significant geopolitical crises of the 21st century, attracting global attention and igniting discussions about sovereignty, nationalism, and international relations. This enduring struggle is deeply rooted in complex historical, cultural, and political dynamics. A comprehensive understanding of the conflict's roots and character necessitates a multidimensional analysis encompassing the pervasive influence of Soviet Legacies, the collision of competing Nationalist narratives, and the reshaping of the security environment by Cold War Geopolitics. This paper investigates how these foundational factors contributed to the conflict, which escalated through periods of Russian assertiveness and culminated in military aggression during the Putin era.

The first section of this study focuses on *Nationalism and the competing claims to statehood* for Russia and Ukraine. Both nations trace their historical genesis to the medieval state of Kievan

Rus.³³ The existence of the independent Ukrainian People's Republic in late 1917 contradicts Putin's later argument that Ukraine was "invented by Lenin." This was aggravated by Imperial policy to suppress Ukrainian cultural distinction, banning the language and claiming that the local dialect was merely Russian "corrupted by the Polish influence". After achieving independence in 1991 (approved by over 90% of voters following the August coup), Ukraine established an inclusive national identity through 'Civic Nationalism'³⁴, enshrined in its Constitution by defining the "Ukrainian people" as "*the citizens of Ukraine of all nationalities*", a framework credited with preventing major ethnic strife before 2014.

The second section addresses the dramatic landscape created by the *Cold War's conclusion and subsequent Geopolitical Dynamics*. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 profoundly restructured European power dynamics, ushering in an era of state-building but leaving unresolved territorial and ethnic questions.³⁵ Ukraine's strategic position made it a contested area, especially as Western alliances, specifically NATO and the European Union (EU), expanded eastward. Russia perceived this expansion into the Soviet sphere as a direct strategic threat³⁶ Accordingly, Russia viewed Ukraine as a crucial buffer zone and sought to maintain its hegemony over its neighbour. Meanwhile, Ukraine sought external alliances and integration with Western institutions as a means of asserting its sovereignty and charting an independent course away from Russia's sphere of influence.³⁷

The third section details the evolution of Post-Soviet Russian assertiveness through the enduring influence of *Soviet Legacies*. The Soviet era, particularly the Stalinist period, inflicted indelible trauma on Ukraine through mass purges, cultural repression, and the devastating famine (Holodomor). Russian historical narratives deny the specific targeting of Ukrainians during the famine, asserting that the Holodomor was merely a "common problem" of the Soviet past, rather than a campaign against Ukrainians.³⁸ This attempt to control historical memory fueled policy

³³ Syed Rizwan Haider Bukhari, et al., "Ukraine and Russia: A Historical Analysis of Geopolitical Dynamics, National Identity, and Conflict Escalation Leading to the Present-Day Crisis", pp. 5804-05

³⁴ Taras Kuzio, "Russian National Identity and the Russia-Ukraine Crisis", Federal Academy for Security Policy (2016), pp. 3-4.

³⁵ Bukhari, "Ukraine and Russia", p.5805.

³⁶ Bukhari, "Ukraine and Russia", p.5809.

³⁷ Bukhari, "Ukraine and Russia", p.5812.

³⁸ Mikhail Zygar, *War and Punishment: Putin, Zelensky, and the Path to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2023), pp. 92-106.

differences, exemplified by Putin's early articulation of the strategic imperative. Moscow utilised this assertive approach to project regional power, employing geopolitical tools such as leveraging economic dependencies and weaponising energy resources. Putin realised that Gazprom (meaning gas industry in Russian) was a potent foreign-policy weapon, using gas supplies to exert influence over energy-dependent nations and to pressure Kyiv to prevent a successful democratic transformation.

Finally, the paper examines the *Putin Era* and the resulting escalation of conflict. This period saw imperial ambitions consolidate into military confrontation, driven by Putin's deeply ingrained historical views. Putin explicitly dismissed Ukraine's legitimacy, stating, "*Ukraine is not even a country!*" and threatened that if Ukraine joined NATO, it would "simply disintegrate". Moscow utilised information warfare and propaganda, framing Ukrainian nationalists as "*Banderites*" (traitors) and exploiting the memory of World War II victory to cultivate aggressive patriotism. Russian aggression, including the annexation of Crimea and support for separatist movements, was consistently justified using historical myths and disinformation. Ultimately, the Russia–Ukraine conflict is fundamentally characterised by a decisive collision between Ukraine's sovereign pursuit of democracy and self-determination and Russia's determination to restore a perceived sphere of imperial influence through geopolitical and military aggression.

1. The Question of Nationalism

Understanding Russian and Ukrainian nationalism is essential for comprehending the nuanced relationship between the two nations. The nationalism of both countries is inherently rooted in the collective conscience of their populace, shaped and influenced by various factors. Historical narratives play a vital role in constructing these nationalistic ideologies—both nations draw upon centuries-old narratives of statehood and conquests. While the legacy of Kyivan Rus symbolises Ukraine's ancient roots and aspirations for sovereignty, the grandeur of the Tsarist Empire and sacrifices during World War II are used by Russia as a justification for its geopolitical ambitions.

Nationalism also takes shape through culture in the form of language, religion, and traditions. Language holds a central place in the construction of national identity. The Ukrainian language has been used time and again to assert Ukraine's cultural autonomy and reject Soviet Russification policies. Parallely, the Russian language is viewed as a unifying force for the continuum of Russian civilisation and also as a defensive weapon against perceived Western encroachments. In the Russian language, there are two words for Russian: *Rossiiskii* and *Russkii*. The first is used to describe the state, the territory, the multinational empire, the second to describe the language, the culture and the life of ethnic Russians as distinct from non-Russians³⁹, the latter reflecting the ethos of ethnic nationalism, as propounded by Russia. For instance, the imperial policy attempted to suppress Ukrainian cultural distinction, banning the language and claiming that the local dialect was merely Russian "corrupted by the Polish influence". Russian imperial narratives, formalised by Innokenty Gizel's 17th-century Synopsis, asserted a single "*pan-Russian Orthodox people*," connecting Kyiv's history directly to Moscow and establishing this version as official historical logic until the 21st century. Conversely, Ukrainian historians, notably Mykhailo Hrushevsky, argued that Kyivan Rus was the true forerunner of Ukraine, with its distinct cultural and linguistic trajectories.⁴⁰

Ukrainian and Russian nationalism are intricately interwoven with the nuances of ethnic and linguistic identities, each espousing the uniqueness of their respective cultural fabrics, languages, and historical narratives. Ukraine, with its diverse ethnic composition and linguistic plurality, grapples with the challenge of nation-building in a multicultural context. **Smith**⁴¹ strongly advocates for the recognition and promotion of Ukrainian identity, both on the domestic and global stage, as its nationalism is deeply rooted in its rich cultural tapestry. For Russia, on the other hand, promotion of a Russophone identity among ethnic minorities, both within and outside its borders, serves as a means of extending its cultural and political influence and reinforcing its status as a dominant regional power.⁴² **Hosking** rightly notes the emphasis laid by

³⁹ Geoffrey Hosking, "Can Russia Become a Nation-State?", *Nations and Nationalism* 4, no. 4 (1998): 10, pp. 449-462.

⁴⁰ Mikhail Zygar, *War and Punishment: Putin, Zelensky, and the Path to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2023), pp. 92-106.

⁴¹ Graham Smith, ed., *The Nationalities Question in the Soviet Union* (London: Longman, 1990), 1946-48.

⁴² Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (1993), cited in Bukhari, "Ukraine and Russia", p. 5812.

Russian nationalists on the uninterrupted historical trajectory of Russian civilisation, tracing its origins to the medieval state of Kievan Rus' and accentuating Russia's role as a Eurasian power.⁴³

The intricate interplay between Ukrainian and Russian nationalism has been a pivotal factor shaping the historical relationship between the two nations. Ukrainian nationalists have repeatedly sought to assert Ukraine's sovereignty and cultural uniqueness in the face of historical and contemporary Russian influence. The resurgence of Ukrainian nationalism, particularly following Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991, has been characterised by efforts to promote the Ukrainian language and culture, thereby challenging the longstanding dominance of Russian cultural hegemony. Conversely, Russian nationalists view Ukraine as an integral constituent of the broader Russian world, emphasising the shared historical, cultural, and linguistic ties between the two nations. The *1654 Treaty of Pereyaslav between Ukraine and Russia* remains a source of contention to this day, as Russia viewed it not as an equal union but as Ukraine's submission. Thus, reinforces Russia's role as the guardian of Slavic unity and championing its historical mission to protect and preserve the interests of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking populations beyond its borders.

The Soviet Nationality Policy began with Leninist Federalism, adopting a federal structure and granting republics the constitutional right to secession via the 1922 Union Treaty. The 1920s saw *Korenizatsiya* (nativisation), which promoted indigenous nationals and local languages, notably resulting in "*Ukrainianisation*". Stalin reversed this through Russification, viewing minority nationalism as a threat, and engineered the devastating Holodomor (1932-33) to crush Ukrainian identity. This era culminated in promoting Russians as the "*elder brother*".⁴⁴ Post-Stalin, Khrushchev denounced deportations and pursued the national "flourishing" (*ratsvet*) and "drawing together" (*sblizhenie*). Brezhnev subsequently coined the term "Soviet People" (*Sovetskii narod*) while dropping the explicit commitment to eventual "merger" (*sliyanie*). In the post-Soviet period, unlike the leaders of Ukraine and the three Baltic states, Yeltsin never wholeheartedly supported a quadruple transition of nation-building, state creation, democratisation, and marketisation. Instead, he adopted contradictory policies backing Russian

⁴³ Geoffrey Hosking, "Can Russia Become a Nation-State?", *Nations and Nationalism* 4, no. 4 (1998): 10, pp. 449-462.

⁴⁴ Zygar, *War and Punishment*, pp. 92-127.

nation-building and the continuation of a surrogate USSR through close political, economic, and security integration of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Putin and Russian leaders believe that Russians and Ukrainians are “odyn narod” (one people), which necessitates they live in one union or within a common cultural space such as that defined by the “Russkii Mir” (Russian World).⁴⁵ In his 2021 Essay, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," he (Putin) laid out a detailed ideological justification for war, portraying Ukraine as an artificial anti-Russia project, specifically through its alignment with Western values and political structures that contradict the 'Russian World' (Russkiy Mir) ideology, which served as a public statement of intent for the present conflict.⁴⁶

Furthermore, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is still a central part of Russian national identity and unionist nationalism. ROC's canonical authority over Ukraine is central to maintaining its influence in the Orthodox world—though Ukraine has one-third the population of Russia, it has almost the same number of orthodox parishes.⁴⁷

The ongoing conflict underscores the deep-seated tensions and rivalries that continue to shape the historical relationship between Ukraine and Russia, highlighting the enduring legacy of nationalist sentiments and geopolitical ambitions in the region. Ultimately, the divergence between Ukraine's inclusive civic nationalism and Russia's restorative imperial identity created an existential incompatibility. While Ukraine's national project looked inward to consolidate democratic legitimacy, Moscow perceived this shift as a precursor to an outward geopolitical realignment. Thus, the 'Clash of Identities' analysed here did not occur in a vacuum; it became the catalyst for the structural friction of post-Cold War security dynamics, most notably the expansion of Western alliances.

2. Cold War Geopolitics

⁴⁵ Taras Kuzio, "Russian National Identity and the Russia-Ukraine Crisis", p. 2.

⁴⁶ Putin, Vladimir, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians".

⁴⁷ Taras Kuzio, "Russian National Identity and the Russia-Ukraine Crisis", p. 2.

NATO, the EU, and Russia's sphere of influence have considerably shaped Europe's geopolitics in the post-Cold War era. While NATO and the EU's expansion in Eastern Europe brings stability and prosperity on one hand, it ushers in tensions with Russia on the other. The assertive foreign policy displayed by Russia is a testament to its determination to preserve its sphere of influence (SOI) and challenge the hegemony of the West.

Historical Context

The end of the Cold War led to a restructuring of power dynamics on the continent or the world at large—a shift towards a unipolar world, simultaneously initiating the period of “failed decolonization” for the Russia metropole.⁴⁸ As **Gaddis**⁴⁹ mentions, with the disintegration of the USSR, the countries formerly falling under its SOI began to assert their sovereignty and establish closer ties with Western institutions. This also marked the demise of communism. The post-Cold War era also witnessed Western initiatives, including consolidation of democratic governance, promotion of economic integration, and enhancement of security cooperation, which furthered tensions with Russia. The encroachment of Western institutions into regions within Russia's SOI led to apprehensions about perceived threats to Moscow's strategic interests, to which Russia responded with resistance, thereby heightening the already existing geopolitical tensions.⁵⁰ Thus, a clash arose between Western aspirations for integration and Russia's efforts to safeguard its geopolitical interests. **Mearsheimer**⁵¹ has emphasised the significance of these geopolitical dynamics—the role of power struggle and strategic cooperation in shaping the post-Cold War era. These developments continue to reverberate in contemporary European geopolitics, highlighting the enduring impact of the Cold War on the global stage.

NATO Expansion

The eastward enlargement of NATO is often cited by the “Realist” school of international relations as the primary catalyst for the current conflict. This perspective, most prominently championed by scholars like **John Mearsheimer**, posits that the international system is

⁴⁸ Mark Edele, *Russia's War Against Ukraine: The Whole Story* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2023) pp.15,102.

⁴⁹ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (2005), cited in Bukhari, "Ukraine and Russia", p.5808.

⁵⁰ Bukhari, "Ukraine and Russia", p. 5808.

⁵¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2014), cited in Bukhari, "Ukraine and Russia", p. 5809.

inherently anarchic, forcing great powers to protect their ‘backyards’ and maintain ‘spheres of influence’ as essential security buffers.⁵² Thus, the inclusion of former Warsaw Pact nations—such as Poland, Hungary, and the Baltic States—can be associated with several factors. First, the desire to ensure stability, democracy, and collective defence across the continent, extending it to former Soviet bloc nations. Second, NATO saw its expansion as a means of extending protection to vulnerable Eastern European countries. However, what NATO probably didn’t intend to was the consequent ignition of geopolitical tensions and rivalries, particularly with Russia.⁵³ Moreover, the prospect of NATO’s military infrastructure creeping closer to Russia’s borders has fueled perceptions of encirclement and prompted Moscow to adopt a defensive posture, heightening regional tensions and exacerbating geopolitical rivalries.⁵⁴ Realists argue that by promising future membership to Ukraine and Georgia at the 2008 Bucharest Summit, the West ‘poked the bear’, making a Russian military response in 2014 and 2022 an almost inevitable reaction of a great power attempting to prevent hostile military infrastructure from reaching its borders.⁵⁵ The ensuing geopolitical tensions highlight the enduring significance of power politics and strategic competition in shaping contemporary international relations.⁵⁶

However, a deeper analytical critique suggests that while the Realist paradigm explains the character of the power struggle, it fails to account for the roots of the conflict, which are more accurately found in the collision of nationalist identities and Russia’s failed decolonisation.⁵⁷ Historians like **Mark Edele** argue that NATO expansion was not a predatory recruitment campaign by the West, but was essentially ‘demand-driven’ by Eastern European nations.⁵⁸ These states opened up doors of Western institutions because they correctly perceived a resurgent, imperialist Russia as a permanent security threat.⁵⁹ Furthermore, historical reconstructions of the 1990-91 negotiations reveal that Gorbachev failed to secure any legally

⁵² Edele, *Russia’s War Against Ukraine*, pp.16,116; Mearsheimer, "Why the West Is Principally Responsible for the Ukrainian Crisis," (2022), cited in Edele,p. 370

⁵³ Bukhari, "Ukraine and Russia", p. 5809.

⁵⁴ Ian Bremmer, *Us vs. Them: The Failure of Globalism* (Portfolio, 2018), cited in Bukhari, "Ukraine and Russia", p.5809; Edele,“Russia’s War Against Ukraine”, p. 15

⁵⁵ Edele, *Russia’s War Against Ukraine*,pp.128–129; Zygar, *War and Punishment*,p.563.

⁵⁶ Edele, *Russia’s War Against Ukraine*,p.106

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Edele, *Russia’s War Against Ukraine*,pp.109,189; Andreas Basekamp, "An Uncertain Journey to the Promised Land," cited in Edele,p.322.

⁵⁹ Edele, *Russia’s War Against Ukraine*,pp.15,109.

binding moratorium on NATO expansion, eventually conceding the principle that sovereign nations have the right to choose their own alliances.⁶⁰

Ultimately, evidence suggests that the focus on NATO is often utilized by the Kremlin as a ‘red herring’ to justify domestic authoritarianism.⁶¹ As **Timothy Synder** notes, the Russian turn against the West in 2012 was less about security and more about the adoption of ‘eternity politics’, which will be discussed in subsequent sections of the paper. Putin’s own ideological justifications— such as his 2021 essay explicitly frame Ukraine not as a security threat, but as an artificial anti-Russia project. Therefore, the conflict represents a decisive collision between Ukraine’s pursuit of sovereign self-determination and a Russian elite suffering from post-imperial phantom pains, for whom the existence of an independent Ukrainian state is a historical anomaly rather than a legal reality.⁶²

EU Integration

The EU’s enlargement to encompass Central and Eastern European nations, along with integration in political and economic spheres, has resulted in the restructuring of the geopolitical dynamics and has had an influence on its political, economic, and cultural landscape. This has helped consolidate democratic governance, promote economic development, and foster regional cooperation.⁶³ The political and economic integration has also fostered greater cohesion and solidarity among member states. For instance, the establishment of common institutions like the European Parliament and the European Central Bank has facilitated the reinforcement of values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, apart from the promotion of economic growth and prosperity on the continent. However, the EU’s expansion has not been free of challenges. Issues of governance (decision-making mechanism, institutional reforms), economic disparities, and strained relations with Russia are some of them.⁶⁴ The eastward expansion of the EU into Eastern Europe has raised concerns in Moscow about the expansion of Western influence and the erosion of Russia’s geopolitical leverage in the region. Consequently, tensions have emerged over

⁶⁰ Edele, *Russia’s War Against Ukraine*, pp.187–188; Mary E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch* (2021), cited in Edele, p.284.

⁶¹ Edele, *Russia’s War Against Ukraine*, pp. 244,336.

⁶² Geoffrey Hosking, "The Freudian Frontier," cited in Edele, pp.16,313

⁶³ Edele, *Russia’s War Against Ukraine*, p.100

⁶⁴ Bukhari, "Ukraine and Russia", pp. 5809-5810.

issues such as energy security, territorial disputes, and geopolitical alignments⁶⁵, underscoring the complexities inherent in EU-Russia relations, which will be discussed in more detail later in the paper.

However, the Kremlin's response to Western encroachment was not limited to diplomatic protest or military posturing. Recognising that a direct confrontation with NATO was structurally prohibitive, Russia instead leveraged 'soft power' and economic mechanisms to maintain its regional hegemony. By weaponising Soviet-era economic dependencies and intervening in Ukraine's domestic political cycles, Moscow sought to neutralise the 'Western threat' from within.

3. Post Soviet developments in Ukraine and Russia

Analysis of Ukraine

The collapse of the Soviet Union marked the end of the Cold War era and led to the emergence of a period characterised by new alliances, rivalries, and security threats. Since then, Russia's actions in Eastern Europe and former Soviet territories have been a key part of its foreign policy—shaping the regional landscape and fueling geopolitical tensions—viewing the expansion of NATO and the EU in its traditional SOI as direct threats to its security and strategic interests. Consequently, Russia has employed a multifaceted approach, utilising military interventions, energy diplomacy, and information warfare to counteract Western influence and safeguard its geopolitical position⁶⁶. Ukraine's strategic location between Europe and Russia makes it a battleground for competing spheres of influence, as Western powers seek to expand their influence in the region while Russia seeks to maintain its traditional sphere of influence⁶⁷. Russia views Ukraine as a crucial buffer zone and seeks to maintain its geopolitical hegemony over its neighbour through various means, including economic coercion, military intervention, and support for separatist movements. Conversely, Ukraine seeks to assert its sovereignty and

⁶⁵ Edele, *Russia's War Against Ukraine*, p.125.

⁶⁶ Bukhari, "Ukraine and Russia", p. 5807.

⁶⁷ Bukhari, "Ukraine and Russia", p. 5808.

align itself with Western institutions, such as the European Union and NATO, as a means of breaking free from Russia's sphere of influence and charting its own independent course.

Belovezha Accords, signed on 8 December 1991, marked the end of the USSR era and resulted in the emergence of 15 new republics. Following the disintegration, these republics faced significant challenges, particularly in political and economic terms. Russia and Ukraine, two of the most important republics, followed markedly different trajectories of political and economic development. Let's look at the differential attitudes and political and economic developments that widened pre-existing differences and advanced into the war of the 21st century.

Ukraine, the new republic that emerged from the USSR, faced hostility from the beginning due to the central government's ignorance of its culture, politics, and economic development. On the eve of disintegration, the entire Soviet economy was struggling; Ukraine inherited this legacy of poor economic performance and a continuing hangover from the catastrophe of the 1990s. Another major problem was political instability caused by inexperienced leadership. Ukraine's population was multi-ethnic—Russians, Jews, Belarusians, Moldovans, Bulgarians, Lithuanians, etc. Big regional differences made the situation worse: regions like Lviv favoured independence from the Russian empire, whereas Russian-majority regions like Crimea were against separating from Russia. High corruption remained another major issue of post-Soviet states.

Economically, Ukraine continued to suffer from the legacy of the poorly performing Soviet economy. Agriculture remained disastrously unproductive. It also suffered from the economic burden of the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe, ageing and inefficient equipment, and dependence on Russian oil and gas. Between 1991 and 1996, the Ukrainian economy contracted every year by at least 10 per cent, and by 1996 it had shrunk to 43 per cent of its 1990 level. Even after 1996, it did not fully recover; growth was slight and stagnated after 2009. Later, due to Russia's proxy war in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea, the Ukrainian economy halved between 2013 and 2015⁶⁸.

⁶⁸ Edele, *Russia's War Against Ukraine*, pp.82-83

The major factor that made the present situation possible was Ukraine's internal polity since 1991. Most newly independent republics after disintegration opted for authoritarian regimes. Ukraine chose a competitive authoritarian regime where authoritarian elements competed with democratic ones. After disintegration, republics were divided between two tendencies: remaining in Russia's orbit or moving away from it. For those opting out, the natural choice was orientation toward Europe; for those opting in, their constitution tended to reflect the Russian model of "crown presidency." Ukraine belonged to the former category, but political struggle was intense, and this remains one of the primary reasons behind the current conflict⁶⁹. Ukraine's political system largely resembled a democracy, with peaceful transfers of power. Compared to autocratic neighbours like Belarus and Russia—ruled by Alexander Lukashenko since 1994 and Vladimir Putin since 1999—Ukraine has had seven presidents: Leonid Kravchuk (1991–94), Leonid Kuchma (1994–2005), Viktor Yushchenko (2005–10), Viktor Yanukovich (2010–14), Oleksandr Turchynov (2014), Petro Poroshenko (2014–19), and Volodymyr Zelensky (since 2019). Out of these, only two were removed by revolutions: the first peaceful, the second violent, which became the launchpad for Russian hostilities and insecurities⁷⁰.

Democratic developments in Ukraine were marked by push and pull between the president and parliament. Democratisation was not linear. After 1991, there was a sharp decline in democratic tendencies, which revived during the 2004 Orange Revolution and again in 2014 during Euromaidan.

The Orange Revolution occurred when a political scandal revealed that outgoing pro-Russian president Leonid Kuchma tried to help Viktor Yanukovich come to power by falsifying elections. Official results showed a narrow victory for Yanukovich, but independent exit polls showed the opposite—Yushchenko at 53% and Yanukovich at 44%. Ukraine's security service tapped the phone of the election falsifier and shared the evidence with Yushchenko's team, proving the rigged process⁷¹.

⁶⁹ Edele, *Russia's War Against Ukraine*, p.85

⁷⁰ Edele, *Russia's War Against Ukraine*, p.85

⁷¹ Edele, *Russia's War Against Ukraine*, pp.87-89

Mass protests erupted in Kyiv. The revolution ended after a negotiated transition of power with help from the European Union. The compromise involved a re-run of the elections, which Yushchenko won. Constitutional reform shifted power away from the presidency towards parliament. This convinced Putin that the revolution was the result of Western meddling and that Washington was trying to turn Ukraine into an anti-Russian state.

In 2010, Yanukovich, the loser of 2004, won the presidency. He consolidated unprecedented power and built an autocratic kleptocracy. Ukraine began to resemble Russia. Another revolution, this time more violent, erupted in 2014 when the government refused to sign the EU Association Agreement, signalling a return to Russia's sphere of influence and further entrenchment of authoritarian tendencies. The movement turned violent when police suppressed protesters. On 18 December, police began shooting live rounds. Violence moved from the streets to parliament, and this whole action came to be known as the **Revolution of Dignity**⁷².

On 21 February 2014, foreign ministers of Poland, France, and Germany arrived in Ukraine for a peaceful settlement. An agreement was signed between Yanukovich and the opposition for an interim government, rebalancing power towards parliament, and early presidential elections. However, Yanukovich fled to Russia. Afterwards, parliament restored the 2004 Constitution, removing much of the president's power and returning Ukraine to a parliamentary republic.

Analysis of Russia

Now discussing Russia, the post-disintegration period was also difficult for the successor of the empire. Dreams of a free and prosperous Russia collapsed into chaos, division, and inequality. Its economic situation was as bad as Ukraine's: GDP declined by 43 per cent between 1991 and 1998. Politically, after the collapse of the USSR, Russia's attempt at parliamentary democracy was ultimately short lived and shattered. This period was defined by a steady retreat from democratic norms, as President Boris Yeltsin moved to rule primarily by decree throughout 1992 and 1993 the defining moment of this transformation was the October 1993 assault on parliament where Russian tanks were used to dismantle the very legislative body they had protected just two

⁷² Edele, Russia's War Against Ukraine, pp.89-91

years prior. This violence paved the way for a new constitution that significantly expanded the powers of the presidency, effectively ending the democratic experiment and laying the constitutional foundations for a strong presidential regime.⁷³

Then came the Putin era. Putin recentralised power away from provincial elites and back towards Moscow. He built a strong presidency.⁷⁴ He first came to power as acting president in late 1999, then as elected president from 2000–2008, and again from 2012 onward, after switching roles with his prime minister Dmitry Medvedev from 2008–2012. Putin strengthened vertical power through an imperial presidency. The Chechen insurgency provided further justification to connect imperialism with authoritarian retrenchment. In 2004, Putin used a Chechen terrorist attack on a school in Beslan to further strengthen his presidency.

Liberal nationalism diminished, replaced by ethnic nationalism and imperial nationalism. Putin repeatedly emphasised Russia's centuries-long multinational empire, a vision deeply rooted in the works of the fascist philosopher Ivan Ilyin. Snyder argues that Putin's worldview is a manifestation of the "politics of eternity," where a leader manufactures a sense of permanent crisis to distract from the lack of social mobility at home. By the 2010s, Putin relied on Ilyin's authority to justify undermining the European Union and invading Ukraine, famously citing Ilyin as his primary authority on the past in his most important self-composed presidential speeches⁷⁵. As imperial nationalism grew dominant, the system drifted towards dictatorship. Opposition became increasingly dangerous.

Civil and political rights contracted, but the economy expanded. Russia became a major exporter of oil and the world's second-largest in 2021. Oil prices, which had crashed under Gorbachev, recovered during Putin's rule, and Russia exploited this recovery to expand production after 1999, revitalising the economy. But prosperity came at the cost of inequality; Russia became one of the world's most unequal economies.

Imperial and ethnic nationalism strengthened Russia's role in the region, especially to prevent NATO enlargement. But NATO continued to expand: Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary joined in 1999; Slovenia, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined in

⁷³ Serhii Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (London: Penguin Books, 2023), p.35-36.

⁷⁴ Edele, *Russia's War Against Ukraine*, pp.108

⁷⁵ Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), ch1

2004. Putin saw it as a breach of the NATO-Russia Founding Act signed on 27 May 1997. NATO remained attractive to Russia's neighbours. In 2008, Ukraine and Georgia applied for a Membership Action Plan but were denied, while Albania, Croatia, and Montenegro later joined. In 2010, Yanukovich's victory further cemented Russia's influence in Ukraine. He made clear that Ukraine had no intention of joining NATO and declared it a non-aligned country.

After the 2004 Orange Revolution, the pro-Western government of Yushchenko implemented pro-Western policies. In response, Russia played the "gas card." It built the Baltic Sea pipeline, reducing transit fees that Ukraine earlier collected. After disputes with Gazprom, Ukraine lost preferential rates. In 2008, after failed price negotiations, Gazprom cut deliveries to Ukraine, affecting supply to Eastern Europe. This made Yushchenko unpopular. He promised to end the agreement allowing Russia to use the port of Sevastopol, but he lost the election, and Yanukovich extended the agreement by 25 years.

While Ukrainian aspirations to join NATO receded, ambitions to join the EU remained high. Russia opposed EU expansion. Russian leadership succeeded in convincing Ukraine to turn its back on the EU Association Agreement and integrate into the Russian economic sphere instead. Against this backdrop, Euromaidan erupted⁷⁶.

4. Post 2014 developments: Crimea and beyond

Crimean annexation in 2014 was a well-calculated move by the Russian government. They knew that NATO would not respond in kind to Russia's attack on Ukraine if that attack was decisive and rapidly attained its objective because of obvious logistical limitations. Although NATO was the more powerful body overall, it was relatively weak in the region. The Crimean annexation of 2014 was opportunistic, unplanned, and based on a snap assessment of fast-moving events.

⁷⁶ Edele, *Russia's War Against Ukraine*, pp.118-125

Initially, the Russian plan was to put pressure on Kyiv to negotiate and shape the revolution's outcome according to Russia, but this did not happen⁷⁷.

What followed was the well-planned special forces operation: the Russian military in secrecy, local militia, and local politicians pushed rapidly towards secession. The referendum was staged, and a majority of Crimean residents voted to join Russia. A poll by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology had 41 percent of Crimean residents supporting the integration of Ukraine into Russia. Approval ratings for Putin soared, and the media exploded into a patriotic frenzy.

In 2014, Russia broke its pledge to Ukraine by violating the Budapest Memorandum (1994) and the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership with Kyiv (1997). Russia returned to imperial expansion. On 17 March 2014, Crimea declared its independence and asked the Russian Federation to join it.

Another major development was the Donbas insurgency. Donbas is the Russian-speaking industrial heartland of Ukraine in the east. With Russian support, separatist sentiment grew among Russian-speaking people of the region, and they demanded a referendum. An independent poll showed only 30 per cent support for secession. Filled with Russian state-TV propaganda about "fascists" in Kyiv and encouraged by what had happened in Crimea, local separatists took control of the region and asked Moscow for help when Kyiv pushed back. Snyder identifies this as "schizofascism" (the practice of actual fascists labeling their victims as Nazis to justify violence).⁷⁸ Meanwhile, on 15 April, Ukraine launched an "*anti-terrorist operation*" to regain control as its forces moved toward the area. The ceasefire was signed in 2015 with the support of France and Germany.

The conflict was driven by grievances among Russian-speaking communities, perceptions of discrimination by the Ukrainian government, and alleged Russian backing for separatists; the war in Donbas has caused major loss of life, large-scale displacement, and serious economic damage. The annexation of Crimea has strained Russia–West relations, intensified internal

⁷⁷ Anton Bebler, *Crimea and the Ukrainian-Russian Conflict*, Verlag Barbara Budrich, p.195.

⁷⁸ Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, ch5

tensions in Ukraine, and raised broader concerns around regional stability. These developments highlight the role of historical grievances, identity politics, and the complexity of managing conflicts in such volatile settings.

In response to Russia's actions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, both the European Union and the United States imposed economic sanctions. These measures targeted key sectors of the Russian economy—particularly finance, energy, and defence—placing significant pressure on Russia's economic trajectory. Sanctions function not merely as instruments of economic coercion but as tools of normative signalling. For instance, post-2014 sanctions on Russia were designed to impose material costs while simultaneously demonstrating collective international disapproval of territorial aggression. Through coordinated action, sanctioning states sought to uphold global norms of sovereignty and generate sustained political pressure, even in the absence of immediate behavioural change. However, debates continue about their long-term effectiveness, their geopolitical consequences, and their humanitarian impact.

Now the fronts were frozen, but tensions continued to rise between the two nations. The association between Ukraine and the European Union came into effect, and Russia began the construction of two new pipelines: one that crosses the Black Sea to supply Europe via Turkey, and another that runs along the Nord Stream to double the supply to Germany. In the meantime, Russia also finalised the construction of the Crimean Bridge, which connects Russia to the peninsula. This passage was very strategic for both Russia and Ukraine, as ships must cross the Kerch Strait to export goods from the port of Mariupol. Since 2003, both countries had an agreement on free navigation in the Sea of Azov, but Russia now wanted to control maritime traffic.

In 2019, Volodymyr Zelensky won the presidential election on the promise to end the conflict. He maintained a pro-Western policy and sought to obtain Ukraine's membership in NATO. This outraged Putin. He deployed troops along the Ukrainian border and asked NATO to refuse Ukraine's entry, but NATO responded that any sovereign state is free to join any organisation. Russia then sent 30,000 troops to Belarus, officially to conduct joint military exercises, and successfully deployed soldiers all around Ukraine.

On 21 February 2022, Putin delivered a long speech in which he presented his vision of history, claiming that Ukraine is historically part of the Russian land. This speech reflected what Snyder calls the "politics of eternity,"⁷⁹ where a leader invokes ancient myths to deny the modern sovereignty of a neighbor. He concluded the speech by recognising two separatist republics, Luhansk and Donetsk, with which he signed a treaty of friendship and mutual assistance, allowing Russia to send troops there.⁸⁰ Putin's 2021 and 2022 speeches were grounded in the belief that relations with Ukraine are essentially the internal matter rather than an international one. Central to this justification was the narrative Putin shared with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn which argues that Donbas and Crimea are not historical Ukrainian territories, but were instead "given" to Ukraine by Russian Bolsheviks like Lenin. By framing these areas as stolen Russian lands, Putin was able to dismiss the legitimacy of Ukraine's post-soviet borders as an administrative error of the communist era. This pseudo-historical logic served as an immediate precursor to his address, on the morning of 24 February 2022, when he delivered a new speech in which he launched what he called a "special military operation," officially intended to disarm and "de-Nazify" Ukraine. This marked the beginning of the all-out struggle between Russia and Ukraine.⁸¹

Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine conflict did not emerge as the product of a single event; rather, it is a conflict historically shaped long before the end of the Cold War. The ultra-nationalist Russian identity had always been asserted since the formation of the USSR, within which other ethnicities, cultures, and histories were overshadowed. The Soviet legacies created long-term structural tensions. Ukraine gained independence with deep economic, political, and regional fractures. Due to ultra-nationalist Soviet approaches, there were uneven developments, corruption, and weak state institutions.

⁷⁹ Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, ch1

⁸⁰ Address by the President of the Russian Federation, February 21, 2022. Kremlin.ru.

⁸¹ Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, p. 99-103

Divergent nationalisms pulled the states in opposite directions. Ukraine developed civic nationalism oriented toward democracy and Europe, while Russia embraced imperial as well as ethnic nationalism, believing that Russians and Ukrainians were “one people.” Post-1991 developments further deepened the divide: Ukraine moved towards democracy, whereas Russia remained authoritarian and centralised, a trend that intensified under Putin. NATO enlargement and EU involvement in the East remained constant threats to Russia. Political developments in Ukraine, such as the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan—which removed pro-Russian governments and brought pro-Western leaders to power—were seen by Moscow as Western plots, deepening hostilities.

Russia tried to dominate Ukraine through energy coercion and later adopted an expansionist approach by annexing Crimea and supporting separatist movements in Donbas, which were essentially Russian-majority regions of Ukraine. The pro-Western direction of Ukraine and Russia’s insecurities eventually led to Putin’s rejection of Ukrainian sovereignty, calling it an artificial state and using history to justify aggression. Imperial nostalgia, ethnic nationalism, and the *Ruskiy Mir* ideology shaped his foreign policy.

Taken together, the evidence in this paper shows that the Russia–Ukraine conflict is the culmination of long-standing historical legacies, clashing national identities, and sharply diverging political paths since 1991. Ukraine’s uneven but determined move toward democracy and Europe directly confronted Russia’s authoritarian revival and its refusal to accept Ukrainian sovereignty. The annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbas, and finally the 2022 invasion were not isolated events but the outcome of Russia’s enduring imperial mindset and its attempt to reverse Ukraine’s westward shift. As the paper demonstrates, any future stability will depend on acknowledging these deeper structural causes and upholding Ukraine’s right to define its own political course.

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Revamping the Algorithm Through Diaspora: Satire and South Asian Youth Mobilisation in Zohran Mamdani's 2025 Mayoral Campaign

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Abstract

On November 4, 2025, Zohran Mamdani was elected as New York City's mayor becoming the city's first Muslim and first South Asian mayor. Starting as a long-shot candidate with near-zero name recognition in early polls, his victory stunned observers. Yet the true "miracle" was not luck but the transformative power of his campaign strategy. In a city of 447,000 South Asians, roughly 5.1% of the city's population (NYC Population FactFinder's 2020 Census), Mamdani leveraged his familiarity with South Asian culture to sway voters. Targeting the South Asian population, he made his active presence on social media through campaigns incorporating Bollywood-style songs & dialogues, a multilingual approach and by raising real-world issues. These videos generated explosive organic virality, made immigrant families feel profoundly seen and restructured platform algorithms without relying on artificial enhancement. More importantly, Mamdani's victory revealed the power of culturally rooted, meme-driven campaigning. By fusing Bollywood aesthetics with progressive demands (rent freezes, free transit), he transformed a marginalised South Asian diaspora into a decisive force redefining minority political identity. His strategy provides a replicable playbook for constructing power from immigrant communities in megacities globally. Expect a wave of youth-led, culture-first campaigns across North America and Europe, accelerating diaspora candidacies and compelling mainstream parties to adopt emotive, algorithm-savvy,

affordability-centred messaging. Thus, focusing on these aspects, the paper will primarily examine the 2025 mayoral campaign of Mamdani and its resonance within the South Asian diaspora in New York City, particularly among youth and immigrants, spanning from the pre-campaign period (early 2025) to the final election results (Nov 2025). The paper will also analyse how Mamdani revamped the digital algorithm in his favour to mobilise the diaspora in alignment with his mayoral campaign goals.

Keywords: *Elections, Diaspora, South Asian, Youth, Algorithm, Digital Politics*

Introduction

In contemporary democracies, traditional campaign strategies often struggle to mobilise a younger and culturally diverse population, particularly in a highly globalised world. It is within this context that the 2025 New York City mayoral campaign and subsequent victory of Zohran Mamdani emerge as a critical case, highlighting how political communication can move beyond static outreach towards a more dynamic, culturally driven and algorithm-based form of engagement.

This paper examines Mamdani's campaign through the lens of digital diaspora politics, focusing on how satire, anti-globalisation narratives and South Asian youth mobilisation were strategically deployed to transform a numerically limited demographic into a political force behind Mamdani's historic victory. Through a mixed-method approach combining demographic, content & discourse analysis, the paper explores how Mamdani's campaign finds a balance between cultural identity and ideology-based politics using satire to critique the establishment politics while articulating anti-globalisation concerns grounded in the local socio-economic issues.

Beyond just a case study of a single electoral campaign, Mamdani's victory strategy reflects a wider transformation in contemporary politics, where cultural performance, algorithmic visibility and diasporic belonging intersect to reshape democratic participation in the globalised world. By analysing the strategies reflected in the campaign and their broader implications, the paper

contributes to understanding how electoral politics in global metropolises is increasingly shaped by fluid identities, digitalised society and youth-driven political mobilisation. In this sense, the Mamdani campaign stands at the point of sublimation where static political forms give way to the new adaptive modes of mobilisation, offering insights into the future trajectory of diaspora-led and digitally driven political engagement.

To examine the above-mentioned dynamics systematically, this study is guided by the following research questions: How did Zohran Mamdani’s 2025 New York City mayoral campaign utilise culturally embedded digital content to mobilise South Asian diaspora voters, particularly youth? In what ways did satire and anti-globalisation narratives reshape political engagement among historically low-turnout immigrant communities? How did algorithmic visibility generated through organic, culture-first campaigning differ from conventional, technology-driven electoral strategies? What broader implications does Mamdani’s campaign hold for diaspora-led, youth-driven electoral politics in global metropolitan democracies?

Research Methodology

This paper adopts a mixed method approach, combining strategies such as engagement mapping, demographic analysis (of NYC), content analysis, as well as the analysis of the existing discourse on diaspora and digitalisation of politics.

Quantitative analysis is employed through the examination of demographic data, voter turnout statistics, youth participation figures and precinct-level election results drawn from sources such as the NYC Population FactFinder (2020 Census),⁸² CIRCLE estimates and official election data.⁸³ This allows the study to situate South Asian and youth mobilisation within the broader electoral context of New York City.

Qualitative analysis is conducted through content and discourse analysis of Mamdani’s campaign materials, including social media videos, multilingual digital outreach, campaign

⁸² NYC Planning Department, *NYC Population FactFinder: New York City*, <https://popfactfinder.planning.nyc.gov/explorer/cities/New%20York%20City?censusTopics=detailedRaceAndEthnicity>

⁸³ CIRCLE (Centre for Information and Research on Civicdigitalisation Learning and Engagement), “*Young Voters, Power, and the Mamdani Victory: How Youth Shaped Key 2025 Elections*”, CIRCLE, Tufts University, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/young-voters-power-mamdani-victory-shape-key-2025-elections>

merchandise, speeches and media coverage from outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *GQ*. Particular attention is paid to the use of satire, cultural symbols and anti-globalisation narratives.

The study also draws upon secondary literature on diaspora politics, digital campaigning and youth political participation to contextualise the findings. While the paper does not employ large-scale surveys or interviews, triangulation of demographic data, media sources, and digital content enables a robust interpretive analysis of the campaign's political significance.

Limitations of the study include reliance on secondary data and publicly available digital content, as well as the absence of direct voter interviews, which future research may address.

1. Background and Context

1.1 New York City and Migration

New York City is one of the most populous and culturally diverse cities in the United States and the world. The share of the population is very diverse, covering groups of Europeans, Caribbeans, Latin Americans, Africans and Asians. The 2011 data show that these foreign-born groups account for 37% of New York City’s population. The Asian American Federation’s Data Centre reports also reveal that the population is shared by different racial or ethnic groups in New York City.⁸⁴ According to 2020 data, Asians constitute 17.3% of New York City’s population, while Black residents account for 25.8%, and Hispanic and White populations remain the largest at 28.3% and 33%, respectively.⁸⁵

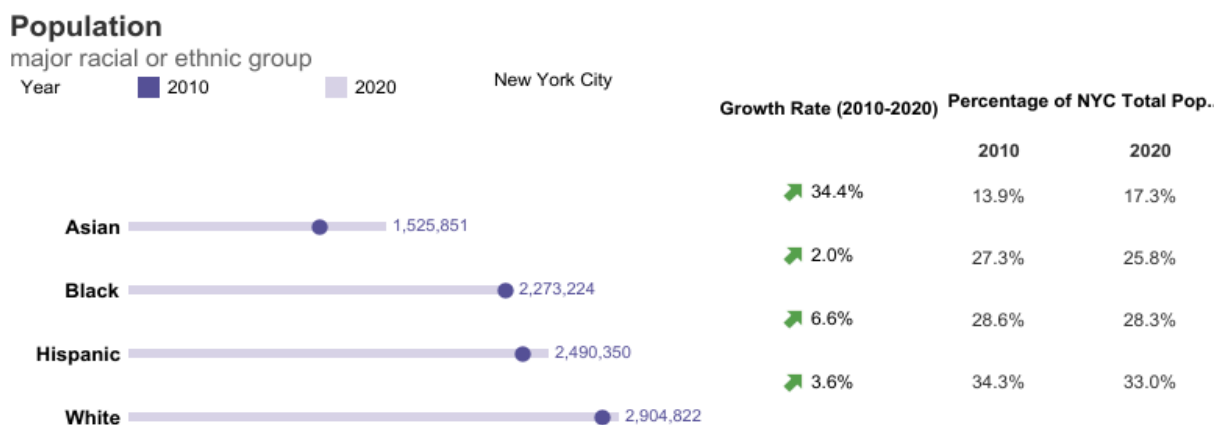


Fig 1 : Major Racial or Ethnic Group Population Share in NYC ⁸⁶

1.2 South Asians in New York City

⁸⁴ Asian American Federation Data Center, “NYC Population: People”, Asian American Federation, <https://datacenter.aafederation.org/nyc/population-people/> (accessed 24 January 2026).

⁸⁵ New York City Department of City Planning, *2020 Census Briefing Booklet*, (New York City, 2021), https://www.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/planning-level/nyc-population/census2020/dcp_2020-census-briefing-booklet-1.p

⁸⁶ Major Racial or Ethnic Group Population Share in NYC, (Asian American Federation), https://public.tableau.com/views/DataCenterNYCCharts1decennial_17476742233330/Population1-MajorR?:language=en-US&embed=y&:sid=&:redirect=auth&:embed_code_version=3&:loadOrderID=0&:display_count=y&:origin=viz_share_link

Within this broad Asian demographic, South Asians, particularly migrants from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, represent a significant and expanding diaspora in the city of New York. Indian Americans are the largest South Asian group, accounting for approximately 2.4% of New York City's population, followed by Bangladesh and Pakistan with a share of 0.5% and 0.7% in the city's population.



Fig 2: Percentage of Asian Ethnic Population by Borough of NYC ⁸⁷

1.3 South Asians' Influence in NYC Electoral Politics

The 2025 mayoral elections marked a departure from the general pattern of electoral politics, where the majority influenced the electoral campaign. Zohran Mamdani, a person from the South

⁸⁷ Percentage of Asian Ethnic Population by Borough of NYC, (Asian American Federation), https://public.tableau.com/views/DataCenterNYCCharts1decennial_17476742233330/Population3-Percentagebyborough?language=en-US&:embed=y&:sid=&:redirect=auth&:embed_code_version=3&:loadOrderID=2&:display_count=y&:origin=viz_share_link

Asian community, reshaped the political history of New York City, not just by winning the mayoral elections but through an election campaign which redefined the electoral politics and demonstrated how a comparatively modest demographic segment could be transformed into a politically decisive force through culturally resonant messaging, digital visibility and strategic outreach that extended beyond ethnic boundaries. By activating South Asian identity not merely as a voting tool but as a symbolic and mobilising resource, particularly among the youth and digitally connected households, Mamdani's campaign redefined the weight of this population. At the same time, by extending the election's manifesto beyond traditional objectives and incorporating a welfare-based approach, he mobilised the algorithm by totally redefining it. This shift provides the central analytical lens of this study, which examines how Mamdani's campaign converted the demographic limitation and algorithmic biases into electoral leverage through digital, cultural and ideological strategies.

2. NYC Mayoral Elections

2.1 Contextualising the 2025 New York City Mayoral Election

2025 General Election - Mayor

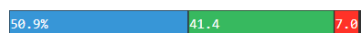
Vote share by election district

Show Election Districts based on:

Search filters (e.g., 'renters', 'income')...

Citywide Results - All Election Districts

2025 General (certified results)



Candidate	Citywide %	Votes
Zohran Mamdani	50.9%	1,114,184
Andrew Cuomo	41.4%	906,614
Curtis Sliwa	7.0%	153,749
Eric Adams	0.3%	6,897
Other	0.3%	6,554
Total		2,187,998

2021 General (allocated to 2025 EDs)



Candidate	Citywide %	Votes
Eric Adams	67.4%	1,450,000
Curtis Sliwa	27.9%	590,000

Scale bars by vote count

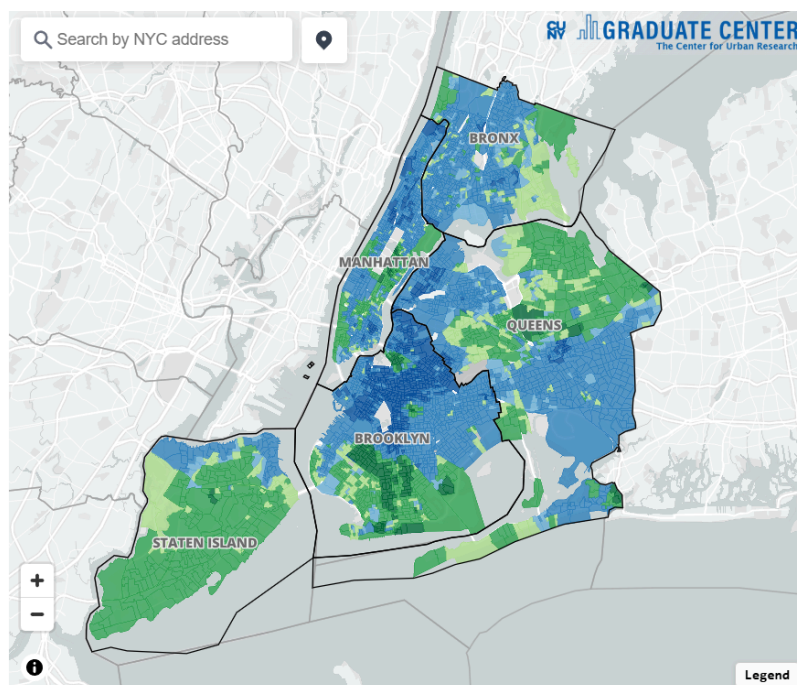
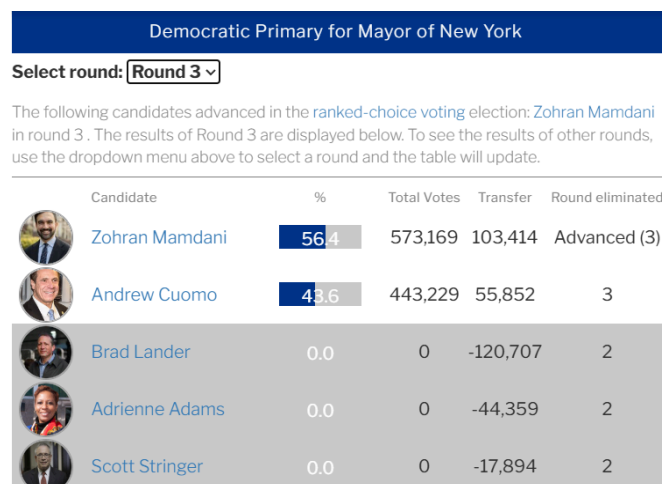
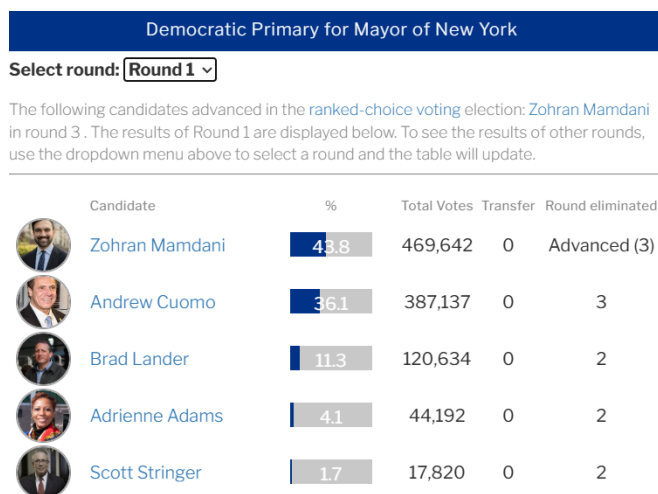


Fig 3: District-wise Vote Share Distribution in the 2025 NYC Mayoral Election ⁸⁸

Historically, NYC mayoral races have acted as testing grounds for the friction between establishment machine politics and insurgent progressive movements, from La Guardia's defeat of Tammany Hall to de Blasio's inequality-focused campaign, which are some classic examples. The 2025 contest was particularly significant, as it pitted the "capital of capitalism" against a democratic socialist platform, testing whether a message centred on affordability and anti-globalisation could succeed in the financial centre of the world.

2.2 Electoral Framework

The election cycle was divided into two phases. The first phase consisted of a Democratic Primary Election, closed to party members only, held on June 24, 2025. The second phase was a General Election, held on November 4, 2025. A special feature was added to this election cycle, given that it was a Ranked-Choice Voting election.



Round-wise Results of the Democratic Primary

for Mayor of New York City ⁸⁹

⁸⁸ District-wise Vote Share Distribution in the 2025 NYC Mayoral Election, NBC New York, <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/politics/nyc-mayor-election-results-neighborhood-breakdown-district-map/6414625/>

⁸⁹ Round-wise Results of the Democratic Primary for Mayor of New York City, BallotPedia, [https://ballotpedia.org/Mayoral_election_in_New_York,_New_York_\(2025\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Mayoral_election_in_New_York,_New_York_(2025))

The turning point in the Democratic primary was Mamdani's association with other Democratic opponents identified with progressivism, such as Brad Lander. This was due to a large number of supporters of Brad Lander, who withdrew from the primaries but later supported Mamdani, propelling him to move ahead of another candidate, Andrew Cuomo.

The primary election recorded high levels of engagement as more than 993,000 New Yorkers participated, as opposed to the 942,000-plus who participated just four years ago.⁹⁰

2.3 Voter Turnout Patterns

The 2025 General Election witnessed a clear re-emergence of public participation in New York City, with the turnout surpassing 2.2 million voters (43.47%), which has been the highest the city has seen in a mayoral contest since 1993. This surge was driven in part by younger voters, as CIRCLE estimates indicate that 28% of eligible voters aged 18–29 participated, signalling renewed youth engagement. Importantly, the rise in turnout was uneven but politically significant, with pronounced increases in immigrant-dense neighbourhoods of Queens and working-class areas of the Bronx, regions that have historically lagged behind Manhattan in electoral participation.

Crucially, younger voters were effectively mobilised through non-traditional, digital-first channels rather than traditional canvassing alone.

2.4 Exit Polls

⁹⁰ CBS News, “Zohran Mamdani, NYC Democratic Mayoral Primary: Queens Community Organizers”, CBS New York, <https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/zohran-mamdani-nyc-democratic-mayoral-primary-queens-community-organizers/>

Exit polling from the 2025 election revealed a clear hierarchy of voter concerns, with "affordability" and "cost of living" displacing crime as the dominant issue. Young voters (ages 18-29) provided Democratic candidate Zohran Mamdani with overwhelming support:

- **Zohran Mamdani: 75%** of the youth vote.
- **Andrew Cuomo: 19%** of the youth vote.
- **Curtis Sliwa: 5%** of the youth vote.

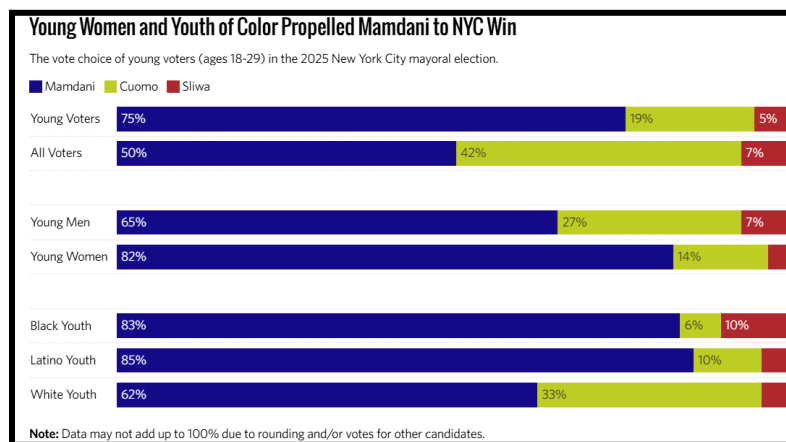


Fig 5: Demographic Voting Patterns in the 2025 Mayoral Election of New York City ⁹¹

2.5 Candidate Landscape and Political Fragmentation

The 2025 New York City mayoral election unfolded within a fragmented three-candidate field shaped by post-primary strategic decisions rather than ideological convergence. Zohran Mamdani, a state assembly member representing District 36, secured the Democratic nomination with 56 per cent of the vote after three rounds of ranked-choice voting. Andrew Cuomo, the former governor, finished second in the primary with 44 per cent but refused to endorse the party's nominee and instead mounted an independent general election campaign under the "Fight and Deliver" ballot line, supported in part by Republican-aligned donors. Curtis Sliwa, the Republican nominee and a previous mayoral contender in 2021, likewise remained in the race despite limited electoral viability. The decisions by Andrew Cuomo and Curtis Sliwa to remain in the general election ended up splitting the anti-Mamdani vote. Instead of rallying behind a

⁹¹Demographic Voting Patterns in the 2025 Mayoral Election of New York City, CIRCLE, Tufts University, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/young-voters-power-mamdani-victory-shape-key-2025-elections>

single challenger, opposition support was divided, which weakened their collective chances. This fragmentation ultimately worked in favour of Zohran Mamdani, allowing him to convert his united progressive base into a clear victory in an otherwise divided contest.

2.6 Election Results

Zohran Mamdani emerged victorious in the general election, securing 50.78% of the popular vote with 1,114,184 ballots cast in his favour. He comfortably outpaced Andrew Cuomo, who received 41.32%, and Curtis Sliwa, who trailed with 7.0%.

Precinct-Level Analysis: The results showed significant overperformance in key territories:

- **Queens:** Mamdani exceeded expectations in historically moderate neighbourhoods like Dyker Heights and working-class communities of Queens.
- **The Bronx:** Mamdani flipped the Bronx, winning by a 12-point margin after losing it by 18 points in the primary, driven by the Latino working-class vote.

These results defied pre-election expectations that a socialist candidate would hit a "ceiling" of 30%. Instead, Mamdani became the first mayoral candidate since John Lindsay in 1969 to receive more than one million votes.⁹²

2.7 Interpreting Results

The 2025 election results reveal a foundational restructuring of the New York City electorate. The data indicate that the "missing millions", which were the voters who were historically opted out of municipal elections and are now successfully activated. The massive youth skew (75% for Mamdani) along with the 28% youth turnout suggests that political socialisation for Gen Z is occurring primarily through algorithmic channels, where viral authenticity holds more weight than traditional endorsements. Furthermore, the high turnout among South Asian communities validates the "Diasporic Algorithm" thesis, which argues that culturally specific communication can mobilise voters who are invisible to mainstream polling.

⁹² CIRCLE (Centre for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement), *Young Voters, Power, and the Mamdani Victory: How Youth Shaped Key 2025 Elections*, CIRCLE, Tufts University, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/young-voters-power-mamdani-victory-shape-key-2025-elections>

3. Key Findings

How did Mamdani’s campaign help him achieve victory?

Zohran Mamdani's 2025 New York City mayoral campaign demonstrates a paradigm shift in urban electoral politics, blending grassroots activism, cultural performance and digital savvy to mobilise historically under-mobilised communities. This strategic campaign propelled Mamdani to stand out from others and become the first to secure the most votes of any candidate in NYC primary history for the Democratic nominee for the position of mayor of New York City. Announced on October 23, 2024, his campaign rested on an ambitious policy agenda which encompassed fare-free city buses, a rent freeze on rent-stabilised housing, universal child care and the construction of 200,000 new affordable housing units.^{93,94} Distinct from his competitors, Mamdani used his hip-hop persona to cultivate emotional resonance with South Asian immigrants and younger voters. The following section will dive deep into the campaign's multidimensional aspects, covering various platforms and innovative use of social media by drawing upon primary sources such as campaign materials, media coverage (e.g., The New York Times, The Wire) and demographic data from NYC Population FactFinder (2020 Census).⁹⁵

3.1 Campaign Announcement and Policy Platform

For most of the Democratic primary campaign, Zohran Mamdani consistently trailed former New York governor Andrew Cuomo in polling, positioning his candidacy as a long-shot challenge to an entrenched political establishment. Rather than attempting to close this gap

⁹³ Atlan Hassard, “Meet the candidate: Zohran Mamdani”, NY1, 14 May 2025, updated 24 Oct 2025, *Spectrum News*, <https://ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/politics/2025/05/14/meet-the-candidate--zohran-mamdani-nyc-mayor-2025-election>

⁹⁴ Patrick Greenfield and Jon Swaine, “Who is Zohran Mamdani, the New York mayor candidate?”, The Guardian, 23 October 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/oct/23/who-is-zohran-mamdani-new-york-mayor-candidate>

⁹⁵ NYC Planning Department, *NYC Population FactFinder: New York City*, <https://popfactfinder.planning.nyc.gov/explorer/cities/New%20York%20City?censusTopics=detailedRaceAndEthnicity>

through centrist appeals, Mamdani framed his campaign as a deliberate rebuke to neoliberal urban governance, presenting his platform as a “mandate for the working class who built this city.” This framing shaped a policy agenda centred on affordability and equity and closely aligned with his legislative record. His prior advocacy for taxi drivers, including securing 450 million dollars in debt relief following hunger strikes, along with his efforts to expand public transit through 100 million dollars in subway service investments and fare-free pilot programmes, established his credibility as a legislator committed to material redistribution. Building on this foundation, the campaign foregrounded universal free child care as a core policy commitment, proposing comprehensive coverage for all children from six weeks to five years of age as a structural intervention aimed at easing the economic burden on working-class families.

Housing and economic justice were the central axis of the campaign, with Mamdani promising to freeze rents across New York City’s nearly one million rent-stabilised apartments while committing to the construction of 200,000 new affordable housing units over the coming decade. These measures were directly linked to addressing the legacy of racially discriminatory zoning practices, increasing density near transit hubs and eliminating mandatory parking requirements that inflate the developmental costs. Along with these initiatives, progressive tax and revenue reforms were placed as the financial backbone of the campaign’s broader affordability agenda and served as the economic anchor of Mamdani’s anti-globalisation narrative by linking cultural mobilisation to material redistribution for the masses.

The platform also extended beyond domestic policy to encompass public safety reforms centred on community-led approaches rather than policing, alongside global solidarity positions such as support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement and pro-Palestinian equity. Although these stances generated both praise and criticism, the campaign’s broader anti-globalisation ethos, which framed global economic structures as intensifying inequality, resonated strongly with diasporic communities experiencing economic marginalisation and heightened Islamophobia in the post-9/11 political context.

3.2 Digital Strategy and Cultural Performance

Operationalising the Concept of ‘Algorithm’

In this study, the term 'algorithm' does not refer to technical code or artificial intelligence systems in a narrow computational sense. Instead, it is operationalised as the platform-driven systems of content prioritisation and visibility employed by social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and X, which amplify content, based on engagement metrics including shares, comments, watch time and user interaction.

Accordingly, “revamping the algorithm” refers to the strategic generation of sustained organic engagement through culturally resonant, shareable and emotionally compelling content, unlike the paid promotions, bots or AI-generated advertising. Mamdani’s campaign used this engagement trick by embedding diaspora culture, humour and multilingual narratives into political messaging, which increased the algorithmic visibility and reach among the targeted demographics.

Human-first digital strategy

Central to Mamdani's success was a "human-first" digital strategy that was able to "revamp the algorithm through diaspora," eschewing AI enhancements for authentic, meme-driven content. Collaborating with Brooklyn-based agency Melted Solids, the campaign produced multilingual videos on TikTok, Instagram and X, incorporating Bollywood aesthetics to engage South Asian voters.

Mamdani’s digitised campaign revolved around a number of creative arts that transformed political messaging into a rich, culturally immersive experience. One of the most visible expressions of this creative strategy was his amalgamation of Bollywood aesthetics into campaign communication. In several viral videos circulated across TikTok, Instagram and X, Mamdani incorporated Bollywood-style songs, cinematic gestures and intertextual references familiar to South Asian audiences. Most notably, he appeared on screen with his arms outstretched in an open embrace, vividly striking what is widely recognised among Bollywood fans as the “SRK pose”, a visual shorthand associated with warmth, romance and highly wide appeal in Hindi cinema. By drawing upon popular film music from the 1970s and iconic cinematic tropes, the campaign activated a shared cultural memory that deeply resonated across

generations within South Asian households. This aesthetic relatability, along with catalysing extensive digital dissemination among South Asian Generation Z cohorts, also enabled intergenerational transmission within diasporic households, thereby substantially amplifying the campaign's organic outreach and affective resonance.

To ensure that this cultural recognition translated into broader accessibility and political comprehension, the campaign also gave priority to multilingual outreach as a core component of its digital strategy. Mamdani's team produced content in Hindi, Urdu, Bangla, Spanish and Arabic, addressing concrete issues including housing justice, rent stabilisation and voter rights. Rather than treating language diversity as a symbolic gesture, the campaign employed multilingual messaging to directly engage communities, which often remained excluded from mainstream political communication because of linguistic barriers. This approach generated what observers described as "explosive organic virality", with content circulating rapidly within diaspora-specific digital networks, particularly among Gen Z South Asians. Crucially, this form of engagement outperformed the technologically sophisticated but culturally detached AI-generated advertisements deployed by opponents such as Andrew Cuomo, vividly demonstrating that linguistic familiarity and cultural trust could outweigh algorithmically optimised paid content.

Alongside these affirmative and inclusive modes of engagement, the campaign also employed satire as a critical political tool to counter establishment power. With the help of memes, merchandise and performative stunts, Mamdani's digital presence actively mocked elite figures, corporate excess and neoliberal urban governance. Slogans such as "Eric Adams Raised My Rent!" printed on T-shirts and worn during public events creatively depicted everyday grievances into sheer political critique. This satirical framing blended humour with anti-corporate messaging, giving space to complex policy positions, particularly around housing affordability and taxation, to be communicated in an accessible and emotionally engaging form. By turning policy critique into participatory entertainment, the campaign targeted dominant fear-based or punitive narratives with what supporters described as a sense of "joyful buoyancy", reinforcing political engagement as a collective and culturally expressive act rather than a purely adversarial one.

Unlike rivals like Andrew Cuomo (who trailed throughout the primary with AI-heavy attacks) and Curtis Sliwa, Mamdani's low-tech approach, amalgamated with volunteer-led reels and podcasts, eventually built trust, thereby restructuring algorithms via shares rather than bots.

In order to completely understand the significance of Mamdani's digital approach, it becomes highly essential to compare it with the strategies adopted by his principal opponents.

Comparative Analysis with Conventional Digital Campaigning

A comparative examination of Zohran Mamdani's digital strategy against those of his principal opponents highlights a fundamental divergence in campaign logic. While Andrew Cuomo's campaign relied heavily on high-budget, AI-assisted advertising and attack-oriented messaging, and Curtis Sliwa depended largely on traditional media visibility, Mamdani adopted a low-cost, volunteer-driven, culturally embedded digital approach.⁹⁶

Cuomo's campaign prioritised message control and technological sophistication, often producing content designed for rapid dissemination through paid channels.⁹⁷ In contrast, Mamdani's content was structured to invite participatory sharing, remixing and communal identification, particularly within South Asian and youth networks.

This contrast reveals that Mamdani's success was not merely a function of ideological positioning but of differential engagement strategies. Where conventional campaigns treated voters as passive consumers of political messaging, Mamdani's campaign treated them as active cultural participants, thereby achieving deeper algorithmic penetration and sustained mobilisation.

⁹⁶ Politico, "NYC Mayoral Candidates' Ads: Zohran Mamdani Commercial," *Politico New York Playbook PM*, 1 October 2025,

<https://www.politico.com/newsletters/new-york-playbook-pm/2025/10/01/nyc-mayoral-candidates-ads-zohran-mamdani-commercial-00589905>

⁹⁷ 411press, "Who Gets the Follow? Inside the Social Media Campaigns of Three NYC Mayoral Candidates," *411press*,

<https://411press.net/2487/showcase/who-gets-the-follow-inside-the-social-media-campaigns-of-three-nyc-mayoral-candidates/>

This comparison demonstrates that culturally rooted, organic digital strategies can outperform technologically intensive but culturally detached approaches in mobilising underrepresented urban electorates.

3.3 Diaspora Engagement and South Asian Mobilisation

Mamdani's campaign exemplified "diaspora" as a scattered population maintaining ties to its origin while adapting to new contexts. By keenly focusing on NYC's 447,000 South Asians (5.1% of the population, primarily Asian Indian at 256,000). His electoral strategy activated a historically low-turnout group through longstanding relationships. He raised slogans like "Roti and Roses", deployed plastic cups filled with mango lassi (a South Asian yoghurt drink) to explain the voting system based on ranked choice, and repeated the phrase "NYC's first South Asian Mayor" for himself in his videos. This boosted his engagement, made his campaign stand out, and flipped "model minority" stereotypes, eventually moulding diaspora grievances into major political power.

3.4 Youth Mobilisation and Voter Turnout

Mamdani made South Asian Gen Z and recent immigrants the campaign's engine. He made youth part of his campaign through fun, community-focused events that countered pandemic isolation and economic pressures. Campaign "merch nights" at Brooklyn spots like Astor Place involved volunteers screen-printing tees, totes, bandanas, and beanies with Mamdani's logo, often as rewards for canvassing; these became popular Gen Z hangouts. Priya Parker's Substack details DIY sessions with buttons and friendship bracelets, fostering belonging.⁹⁸ His policies, too, that surrounded affordability hit hard for youth drowning in debt and gig-economy precarity, while anti-globalisation jabs framed corporate/tech excess as elite tools screwing over their future.

⁹⁸ GQ, "Zohran Mamdani's NYC Mayoral Campaign Merch and Cultural Aesthetic," GQ, <https://www.gq.com/story/zohran-mamdani-nyc-mayoral-campaign-merch>

Turnout among South Asian voters increased by 40 per cent compared with the 2021 primary, becoming a polling staple. Youth turnout also touched 28% (a huge jump for municipal races), with 75% of 18–29 voters backing Mamdani.⁹⁹

3.5 Opposition and Controversies

Mamdani's electoral campaign was not a smooth, straight road. He had to face various backlashes from his opponents and from the president, Donald Trump, himself. Remarks like 'racist', 'xenophobic' and 'Islamophobic tropes' were used against him, referring to the 9/11 attack and terrorism.¹⁰⁰ Andrew Cuomo, Mamdani's biggest rival, also released AI-generated ads, including one depicting a criminal supporting Mamdani and portraying him in stereotypical ways.¹⁰¹ Curtis Sliwa smeared Mamdani as supporting "global jihad" during debates, and national Republicans like Mike Johnson blamed Mamdani's "socialist" policies for issues like government shutdowns. In early November, President Donald Trump also threatened to withdraw federal funding for New York City should Mamdani be elected mayor.

Rather than engaging directly with these attacks, Mamdani's campaign maintained a consistent messaging focus on affordability-related issues such as housing, transit and childcare. Digital responses largely avoided the rebuttal and instead reinforced the culturally embedded content aimed to sustain engagement among the youth, immigrants and progressive constituencies. This strategy limited the issue of drift and prevented opposition narratives from dominating campaign discourse.

The negative campaigning did not correspond with a decline in Mamdani's digital engagement or electoral support. On the contrary, the campaign's focus on cultural familiarity, humour and policy-centred messaging contributed to the sustained mobilisation of key voter groups, focusing on South Asians and younger voters. This suggests that culturally resonant, participatory digital

⁹⁹ Luis Ferré-Sadurní, "Key Takeaways from the 2025 NYC Mayoral Election and Mamdani's Victory," *The New York Times*, 5 November 2025,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/05/nyregion/nyc-mayor-election-mamdani-takeaways.html>

¹⁰⁰ **Contending Modernities**, "Mamdani and Strategic Islamophobia", *Contending Modernities*, <https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/global-currents/mamdani-strategic-islamophobia/>

¹⁰¹ **The Guardian**, "Cuomo's AI Ads Target Zohran Mamdani in NYC Mayoral Race," *The Guardian*, 23 October 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/oct/23/cuomo-zohran-mamdani-ai-ad>

campaigns can mitigate the electoral impact of adversarial campaigning within algorithm-driven media environments.

3.6 Future Prospects & Implications

The outcome of the New York City mayor's election in 2025 is more than just a local election. It signifies a greater return of youth to the electoral process as a result of digital mobilisation. While this city election was mostly just about the city's administration, it also represents a major change in how young voters engage with democracy within the increasingly digital public arena. This was exemplified by Mamdani's campaign using culturally oriented digital outreach means, which demonstrated to the public how online engagement can translate to offline engagement and result in increased political participation. There is ample evidence that Mamdani's campaign not only had a very large social media presence but also engaged around 50,000 volunteers, most of whom were under 35 years old, to canvass various neighbourhoods throughout New York City as part of a very large ground operation. The merger of digital presence/engagement and youth-led grassroots efforts demonstrates how young voters are now able to engage in political mobilisation simultaneously through both digital and physical means. In this context, the Mamdani campaign is part of an emerging worldwide reconfiguration of how young people are becoming politically engaged through digital platforms, cultural connectivity and peer-to-peer mobilisation, as opposed to through traditional political party structures.

The rise of the political engagement of youth is interconnected with the increasing importance of the impact of diasporic communities on election results in the context of globalisation and the deepening interconnections across borders. In addition to acting as cultural communities, diasporic communities have become politically influential participants in the political life of their host countries, particularly in the United States, where transnational connections between diasporic peoples have increased. In the case of the South Asian diaspora in the United States, this study shows that these communities are having a growing impact on policy and political campaigning, a trend that continues into the 2024 US presidential elections through the voting

power of Indian-American voters. The campaign of Mamdani demonstrates how the political identity of the diaspora can be mobilised and transformed from a demographic category into a sustainable political constituency through the use of issues and culturally relevant messaging. In general, foreign-born communities are an integral part of the political, social and economic fabric of the US, especially at a time when expanding nationalistic governments and draconian immigration policies, such as those enacted by the Trump administration, have made diaspora engagement a politically charged issue in both domestic and international political affairs.

The recent rush of candidates running for all levels of government in 2016 demonstrated why electronic media has changed traditional methods of campaigning. Campaigns leveraging multi-lingual communication, entertainment-based content, and satire as core outreach strategies expand the reach of political communication from traditional party-based messaging to include culturally performed events that provide recognition, engagement and emotional connections between candidates and their constituents. The successful use of these new techniques signals the creation of a new model of electoral campaigning, where digital cultural literacy will be an influential factor in a candidate's political competitiveness. As the use of culturally performed events continues to grow in both advanced Western democracies and South Asian countries, Mamdani's campaign provides a glimpse into the creation of a global trend, whereby elections are mediated through identity, emotion and platform visibility.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Zohran Mamdani's 2025 New York electoral campaign reshaped contemporary electoral politics by strategically utilising diaspora identity, digital culture, satire and youth mobilisation. Going beyond the traditional notion that electoral success in a city as large and diverse as New York is driven mainly by numerical dominance or systematic backing, Mamdani's victory demonstrates how algorithmic visibility and culturally dominated digital communication can significantly amplify the political influence of a comparatively small demographic group. By doing so, the campaign "revamped the algorithm" of political engagement, totally transforming social media from a passive tool of outreach into an active platform for political mobilisation.

The findings of our research highlight how Mamdani’s campaign not only targeted South Asian voters as an ethnic group but also reframed diaspora identity as a political resource capable of resonating beyond community boundaries. Through multilingual messaging and use of Bollywood-style humour and satire, the campaign found a unique sense of recognition and belonging among the South Asian diaspora, particularly youth, while at the same time appealing to a broader voter group. This highlights the role of cultural performance and digital fluency in electoral politics shaped by migration and transnational identities. In addition, our study highlights how youth mobilisation through digital platforms played a central role in converting online engagement into offline political participation. By aligning digital presence with local issues such as housing, inequality, transport services, etc., the campaign was successful in attracting a wider voter base.

In summary, this research contributes to the emerging area of digital diaspora politics by demonstrating how electoral success in contemporary times is increasingly being shaped by the interplay between identity, technology and political narrative. The Mamdani campaign offers a critical case through which we can understand this phenomenon. Future research may be built upon this study, expanding the scope of diaspora politics and digital campaigns across the globe, examining the arena of algorithm-driven political communication and understanding the impact of diaspora-led digital mobilisation on democratic values.

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Identity as Empire:
The Evolution of Russkiy Mir

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of Russkiy Mir from before the 2014 annexation of Crimea to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It argues that Russkiy-Mir functioned primarily as a legitimising narrative rather than a causal driver of Russian aggression. Drawing on analyses of Russian soft power and diaspora outreach, the paper shows that Russkiy-Mir failed to meaningfully mobilise Ukrainian society after 2014. This failure, furthermore, enabled the Russian state to look towards an increasingly coercive deployment, as state-sponsored institutions such as the 'Russkiy Mir Foundation' converted cultural ideals into a geopolitical justification for force.

Keywords: *Collective identity; diaspora; Russkiy Mir; Russian civilisation; geopolitical; Eurasianism; global IR; non-Western ethnocentrism; Crimea; Ukraine; imperialism; cultural policy; Neo-Eurasianism.*

1. Introduction

“For centuries, Russia has developed as a multinational state (as it was originally), a state-civilisation, held together by the Russian people, the Russian language, and Russian culture, which are native to all of us, which unite us and prevent us from dissolving in this diverse world. For the planet, regardless of our ethnic affiliation, we have been and remain a single people.”

- V. Putin, address to the Federal Assembly in 2012¹⁰²

In the graph of geopolitics, if quietude is the trough and disruption is the peak, then civilisational narratives are the waves. The post-Soviet and post-Cold War era resulted in the transmission and magnification of cultural identities, the outcomes of which are witnessed today. Russkiy Mir or the “Russian World” is a civilisational idea based on the following pillars: the Russian language and culture, common history, and Orthodoxy embedded in the Moscow Patriarchate. Patriarch Kirill, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, claimed “Russkiy Mir” is a very special civilisation, to which people who call themselves by different names belong – Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians.¹⁰³

This paper attempts to understand the civilisational identity that is Russkiy Mir, its emergence in political discourse within the context of Russian foreign policy, and its evolution from the 2014 Crimea annexation to the 2022 Ukraine invasion. Here, we discuss a few key grounds on the basis of which this evolution is observed– the Russian-Orthodox Church, the political engagement of the diaspora through the Russkiy Mir Foundation, its failure in 2014, and finally, a consequent re-direction.

¹⁰² Address of the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin to the Federal Assembly. – 2012. – 12 December [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: <https://www.rg.ru/2012/12/12/stenogramma-poln.html>

¹⁰³ Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, Speech at the **Third Russian World Assembly**, 3 November 2009

2. Literature Review

Wasiuta defines the Russkiy Mir as the systemic, aggressive propagation of Russian imperialist ideas at the level of political symbols, language, and culture and a form of unlimited influence on people's consciousness and behaviour, using deliberate distortion of history (Wasiuta, 2017).¹⁰⁴

Russkiy Mir can be understood as a legitimising narrative rather than a causal driver. According to Firmansyah, Rezasyah and Wibawa, along with its military and hard power instruments, Russia has been increasingly active in using ideological and cultural instruments as part of its geopolitical strategy (Firmansyah, Rezasyah and Wibawa, 2025).¹⁰⁵ According to Ulrich Schmid, the Russkiy Mir is originally a cultural concept, which in its ideologised form, is also used to legitimise Russian influence in the post-Soviet area (Schmid, 2016).¹⁰⁶

This concept is not static: experts agree that its interpretation and utility are moulded as per prevailing circumstances and have changed over time. Mikhail Suslov argues that the concept of Russkiy Mir has been instrumentalised to suit the changing requirements of the political scenarios over the last 20 years. In the 2000s, according to Suslov, it was adjusted to the idea of a sovereign democracy, and in the 2010s, it became re-territorialised as an isolationist project– a non-Western model of modernity (Suslov, 2018).¹⁰⁷ A similar argument is drawn by Zdioruk S.I., Yablonsky V.M., and Tokman V.V. They argue that at the dawn of the 2010s, the concept of the Russian World has gradually become pragmatized, wherein it was adapted to the ongoing needs of the Federation (Zdioruk S.I., Yablonsky V.M., and Tokman V.V, 2014).¹⁰⁸ According to Wilfried Jilge, Putin's 2014 push for Russkiy Mir was a long-term strategic doctrine, not a sudden reaction to the Ukraine crisis. Devised by Kremlin-aligned intellectuals between

¹⁰⁴ Olga Wasiuta, "Russkij mir" jako narzędzie imperialnej polityki Kremla, *Przegląd Geopolityczny* 21 (2017), 67–87

¹⁰⁵ Adrian Maulana Firmansyah, Teuku Rezasyah and Satria Wibawa, "Geopolitics of Russia's Heartland and Its Relation to Russkiy Mir Ideology", *Jurnal Locus Penelitian dan Pengabdian* 4, no. 7 (July 2025): 4542–4556, DOI: 10.58344/locus.v4i7.4531, <https://locus.rivierapublishing.id/index.php/jl/article/view/4531/967>

¹⁰⁶ Russki Mir, "dekodeur", 2016, 14.07.2021, <https://www.dekodeur.org/de/gnose/russki-mir>.

¹⁰⁷ Mikhail Suslov, "'Russian World' Concept: Post-Soviet Geopolitical Ideology and the Logic of 'Spheres of Influence'", *Geopolitics* 23, no. 3 (2018): 1–24, DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2017.1407921, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322711410_Russian_World_Concept_Post-Soviet_Geopolitical_Ideology_and_the_Logic_of_Spheres_of_Influence

¹⁰⁸ Zdioruk S.I., Yablonsky V.M., Tokman V.V.

Ukraine and the "Russian World" Project: Analytical Report / S. I. Zdioruk, V. M. Yablonskyi, V. V. Tokman [et al.]; edited by V. M. Yablonskyi and S. I. Zdioruk. Kyiv: National Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014. 80 pp.

1995-2000, it was introduced by Putin in 2001 to legitimise domestic and foreign policies across ideological, geopolitical, and identity-based dimensions (Jilge, 2016).¹⁰⁹

Most scholars, therefore, agree that the idea of Russkiy Mir has transformed in many ways, most significantly from an abstract civilisational idea into a vigorous geopolitical tool. While existing literature deliberates upon the definition, adoption and propagation of Russkiy Mir, we aim to emphasise its evolution, with specific reference to the consequences of the 2014 Crimean annexation on this narrative. Subsequently, we aim to understand how it changed in its approach through various domains. For this, the primary method employed is qualitative discourse analysis.

3. Background and Context

The 16th-century monk Philotheus described Moscow as “the Third Rome”— a messianic idea that forms the root of Russkiy Mir: *Two Romes have fallen, the third stands, and there will be no fourth*. The 19th century was a breeding ground for pan-Slavic ideas, embedded in this greater iconography of the empire. In his 1993 work “Island Russia”, Vadim Tsymbursky presented a critique of imperialism and instead advocated for nationalism. He was one of the pioneers in promoting a neo-isolationist Russia embedded in its territorial characteristics; limited not only to the territorial integrity of the nation state but also of the Russian ethnos. This included territories in Siberia and the Far East, as well as a string of countries in the West that did not truly belong to Europe, and instead acted as ‘buffer zones.’ He advocated for a bloc which rejected Western Civilisation.¹¹⁰ Aleksandr Dugin’s neo-Eurasianist ideas are marked by the presence of a “Great Russian Chauvinism” where Russia is portrayed as a messiah chosen by God to do great things, including the expansion of territories to protect the conquered people.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ *Russkiy Mir: “Russian World”*, German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) event, Berlin, 3 May 2016, discussion on the genesis of the geopolitical concept of the Russian World and its effects on Ukraine, <https://dgap.org/en/events/russkiy-mir-russian-world>

¹¹⁰ Igor Torbakov, “Towards ‘Island Russia’”, *Eurozine*, 14 May 2021, <https://www.eurozine.com/towards-island-russia/>

¹¹¹ Marcin Orzechowski, “*Russkiy Mir (Russian World): An Exemplification of All-Russian Nationalism. The Strategy of Neo-Imperial Expansionism of the Russian Federation in Regional and Global Dimensions*”, *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 53, no. 3 (2024): 21–33, DOI: 10.15804/ppsy202426, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385055913_Russkiy_Mir_Russian_World_An_Exemplification_of_All-Russian_Nationalism_The_Strategy_of_Neo-Imperial_Expansionism_of_the_Russian_Federation_in_Regional_and_Global_Dimensions

On perceptively similar lines, the Kremlin justified the annexation of Crimea by conceptualising Russians as living in a divided nation which sought the restoration of unity. Claims about humanitarian issues, such as protecting the language, are a means to legitimise direct political interference in another country's internal affairs.¹¹² This chauvinism is, however, not without opposition. In fact, a new opposition to Russian imperialism is Russian ethnic nationalism, presented by the slogan "Russia for Russians!" This incompatibility is highlighted by S. Sergeev and V. Solovyov, who argue that the only alternative to a multinational, outward-oriented Russia (the Russian World) is the demise of the Russian state in its current form.¹¹³

It is imperative, then, to situate these ideas within the broader framework of Russian foreign policy. In *The Geographical Pivot of History* (1904), Sir Halford Mackinder argued that whoever controlled the Eurasian heartland would have the potential to dominate the world. The Heartland, according to Mackinder, encompassed most of Russia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe; a region that was geographically inaccessible, rich in natural resources and strategically positioned as a link between Europe and Asia.¹¹⁴ Bradshaw and Prendergast explain that for Russia, control of this region is not just a territorial ambition, but a strategic imperative that has shaped national security policy for centuries.¹¹⁵

Russia, therefore, continues to exert its influence on the 'near abroad', depicting not only indifference towards Western civilisation, but also active resistance towards the Eastward expansion of Western alliances, namely NATO. In his 2007 Munich speech, this fight against the unipolar world was adopted in the public sphere. He characterised Russia as a peaceful state in contrast to the aggressive West, and sought to rally the support of the Global South.¹¹⁶ The

¹¹² Marcin Orzechowski, "Russkiy Mir (Russian World): An Exemplification of All-Russian Nationalism. The Strategy of Neo-Imperial Expansionism of the Russian Federation in Regional and Global Dimensions", *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 53, no. 3 (2024): 21–33, DOI: 10.15804/ppsy202426, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385055913_Russkiy_Mir_Russian_World_An_Exemplification_of_All-Russian_Nationalism_The_Strategy_of_Neo-Imperial_Expansionism_of_the_Russian_Federation_in_Regional_and_Global_Dimensions

¹¹³ Alexander Tsipko, "Russia for Russians': A Game with Death", electronic resource, available at http://rosnation.ru/?page_id=681

¹¹⁴ Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History", *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (April 1904): 421–437, https://ondisc.nd.edu/assets/422105/mackinder_1904_heartland_article_17_pThe_Russian_Orthodox_Church_has_also_weaponised_such_characterisation_of_good_vs_evil_and_clash_of_valuesages.pdf

¹¹⁵ Bradshaw, M., & Prendergast, J. (2005). The Russian Heartland Revisited: An Assessment of Russia's Transformation. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 46(2), 83–122. <https://doi.org/10.2747/1538-7216.46.2.83>

¹¹⁶ Yulia Smirnova, Olga Malysheva, I. A. Aksenov and Elena Tokareva, "Speech of Russian President Putin at the Munich Security Conference 2007 ('Munich Speech 2007') as a Predictor of the Formation of the Modern Foreign

Munich conference was the pivotal point, which marked a sharp contrast from Putin's pro-West and pro-NATO stance, which he adopted in the initial years of his presidency. Such characterisation of good vs evil and clash of values has also been weaponised by the Russian Orthodox Church as a means to advocate for its canonical territory, waging a movement that is inextricably linked to the Kremlin's geopolitical motives. The ideas of a historic Russian empire, neo-isolationism, anti-Western sentiment and chauvinism have thereby become the foundational stones of the emergence, propagation and expansion of *Russkiy Mir*.

4. Between Religion and Politics: The Russian Orthodox Church

Although Joseph Nye characterises soft power as secular in nature, he concedes that 'for centuries, organised religious movements have possessed soft power.'¹¹⁷ According to Jonathon Fox, 'modernity has caused an expansion of the operating spheres of religious movements and governments.'¹¹⁸

In 988, when Grand Prince Volodymyr of Kyiv adopted Christianity from Byzantium, not Rome, the Rus – now a term also applied to the land – became part of the Orthodox Christian world. Putin refers to this as a "civilisational choice", which served as the common point of origin for Ukraine, Russia and Belarus.¹¹⁹ Ukrainians, on the other hand, view the *Kyivan Rus* as the cradle of their own nation. This refers to the common ancestral land of the East Slavic peoples. Throughout history, various Russian rulers have wanted to "gather the Russian lands" and have used this idea of the *Kievan Rus* to justify their ambitions. This idea of gathering the land of the Rus has since been used to justify Russia's imperial advances in Ukraine and Belarus. The Ukrainian national narrative argues that Ukrainian identity and culture have existed since *Kievan Rus*' and were organised in a Ukrainian state at different times in history. In contrast, the Russian

Policy Agenda of the Russian Federation", *Global Change, Peace and Security* (2025): 1–19, DOI: 10.1080/14781158.2024.2441189, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14781158.2024.2441189>

¹¹⁷ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs, 2004).

¹¹⁸ Jonathan Fox, 'Religion as an Overlooked Element of International Relations', *International Studies Review*, 3, no. 3 (2001), pp. 53–73.

¹¹⁹ Christoph Mick, 'How Moscow Has Long Used the Historic Kyivan Rus State to Justify Expansionism', *The Conversation*, 8 March 2022, <https://theconversation.com/how-moscow-has-long-used-the-historic-kyivan-rus-state-to-justify-expansionism-178092> (accessed 10 March 2026).

and Soviet imperial narratives do not consider Ukraine to have an independent history or memory.

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) perceives itself as a civilisational centre, forming the backbone of ideas that understand Russia as a saviour and with a greater purpose. The moral authority of the Church is leveraged both to assert its own position in Russian society and as a complement to the Kremlin's political ambitions.¹²⁰

While the ROC does not explicitly challenge the secular ideas of the Russian Constitution, its role is implicitly political and authoritative, extending to its geopolitical influence. The canonical territory of the ROC has been an issue of contention, reflecting contemporary political tensions. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church has been a major battleground for the ROC's hegemonic survival. In Estonia and Latvia, the jurisdiction of the ROC is frequently challenged by local movements seeking autonomy from Moscow. The Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) reconciled with Moscow in 2007, the same time when diaspora outreach became institutionalised through the Russiky-Mir Foundation.

The 2007 reconciliation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) marked more than an ecclesiastical reunion; it symbolised the union of the Russian church after nearly a century of schism caused by the Bolshevik Revolution. ROCOR had historically positioned itself as the guardian of “true Orthodoxy” in exile, critical of what they believed to be Moscow's subservience to Soviet power. Its reintegration thus allowed the ROC to become the uncontested centre of global Russian Orthodoxy.

By reabsorbing ROCOR, through parish networks, religious education, cultural programming, and coordination with Russian embassies and cultural centres, the ROC provides moral and identity-based cohesion for diaspora communities. This creates a soft-power feedback loop in which spiritual belonging reinforces political affinity, thereby blurring the distinction between religious communion and political leaning.

¹²⁰Maximilian Ohle, Richard J. Cook, Srđan M. Jovanović and Zhaoying Han, ‘Russia's Architecture of Hegemony: Christian Orthodox Subordination Strategies in Russia's Peripheral Zone’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 74, no. 3 (2021), 382–401, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2021.1917518>

In various regards, the ROC acts as a proponent of a Kremlin-centric political order, often promoting the Russkiy-Mir narrative in the context of bringing about a religious revival in Russia and its near abroad.¹²¹

Patriarch Kirill, who became the Patriarch of Moscow in 2009, through his words, has highlighted the complex relationship between power and religious institutions.¹²² Kirill avoids using Holy Rus and Russia interchangeably, through which he implies that the canonical territory goes beyond national boundaries. Natalia Zhdanova identifies four rhetorical themes in Kirill's statements following the 2022 Ukraine invasion: downplaying peace, the metaphysical struggle myth, exhortation to sacrifice, and allusions to historic victories. He carries forward isolationist and hyper-nationalist ideas by framing the war as a cosmic battle between the spiritually superior Russia and the sinful West. This is essentially a re-interpretation of the pacifism adopted by the Church. At the same time, his speeches invoke religious imagery as a justification of the 'crusades' for the victory of good over evil.

5. Constructing the “Russian World” Abroad: The Russkiy Mir Foundation

Tracing the genealogy of the Russkiy Mir Foundation goes all the way back to the 19th-century idea of the 'Russian special path'.¹²³ Inspired by the German idea of *Sonderweg*, the Russian special path filled the vacuum of political and ideological identity in the wake of an unravelling USSR. As this concept enjoyed its renaissance, political elites combined it with the term "*Russkiy Mir*" or the "*Russian World*," which was understood as a global community of Russian speakers.

The Russkiy Mir Foundation was established in 2007 through a Presidential decree by Vladimir Putin, as a governmental organisation for the promotion of the Russian language and culture worldwide. In the following year, the federal agency of Rossotrudnichestvo was founded to deal with the affairs of Compatriots Living Abroad. The establishment of these agencies institutionalised and politicised the Kremlin's cultural policy abroad. According to the

¹²¹ Valerie M. Hudson, 'The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate as Potential "Tool" of Russian Soft Power in the Wake of Ukraine's 2013 Euromaidan', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70, no. 9 (2018), pp. 1357–1376.

¹²² Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 'From pulpit to propaganda machine: Tracing the Russian Orthodox Church's role in Putin's war', available at: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

¹²³ Alexander Meienberger, 'The Concept of the "Russkiy Mir": History of the Concept and Ukraine', *Euxeinos*, Vol. 13, No. 35 (2023), pp. 18-20.

foundation's official website, its main aim is to establish Centres and Cabinets across the world to promote and preserve the Russian language, literature and culture through educational grants and programs.¹²⁴

The Foundation has three means of negotiating a partnership, which differ from country to country. It ideally aims to join hands with public universities because of their broader reach, which allows the Foundation to influence the university's curriculum framework. This collaborative association enables the Foundation to shape students' views on Russian history, literature and culture. If public institutions do not seem interested, the Foundation pursues private associations for collaboration. If the latter fails due to legal reasons, then it tries to fund private entities through its financial aid initiative. Geopolitically, these partnerships in the form of Centres and Cabinets are essential in propagating a state-approved Russian narrative. An in-depth case study conducted on the Foundation's activities in Germany and Austria from 2007 to 2020 suggests a pattern in its functioning. Characteristically, the organisation's work is opaque, lacks boundaries and hinges upon loyalty to the Russian heartland.¹²⁵

The foundation selectively discloses information about its political collaborations and fiscal capacities. Despite its formal mandate as a cultural and linguistic institution, it works in close tandem with Rossotrudnichestvo, thereby blurring the lines between cultural outreach and compatriot politics. The foundation's rapid expansion across numerous countries, unsupported by sustained funding or long-term maintenance, further suggests that symbolic presence and visibility were prioritised over dutiful diplomacy. Conceptually, its activities promote an imperial vision of Russian civilisation, through commemorations of Victory Day and marches of the "Immortal Regiment," grounded in selective historical memory and aligned with a conservative state ideology. In this configuration, *Russkiy Mir* emerges not as a plural cultural space but as a state-aligned framework designed to further Russia's geopolitical narratives abroad.¹²⁶

Analyses of Russian embassy communications in the Balkans reveal that state-sponsored outreach on the embassy's Facebook profile prioritises the dissemination of a standardised

¹²⁴ *Russkiy Mir*, official website, <https://en.russkiymir.ru/> 'Foundation Objectives'.

¹²⁵ Alexander Meienberger, "The Russkiy Mir Foundation: State Politics Through Cultural Endeavors?", *Religion in Praxis*, 16 April 2024, <https://religioninpraxis.com/the-russkiy-mir-foundation-state-politics-through-cultural-endeavors/>.

¹²⁶ Meienberger, "The Russkiy Mir Foundation", para. 4.

Russian worldview over the cultivation of regionally specific cultural relationships. Before Russia invaded Ukraine, messaging relied primarily on neutral or affirmative representations of Russian culture and history. The post-invasion period marked a clear shift toward messaging that explicitly condemned Western institutions and attributed responsibility for the conflict in Ukraine to external actors. This transition reflects the operationalisation of *Russkiy Mir* as a legitimising narrative, positioning Russia as a guarantor of security in opposition to a ‘Russophobic West,’ as characterised by the media. The repetitive and generic nature of these communications suggests a centralised institutional strategy, one which could be reproduced for any Russian embassy in Europe. Crucially, the limited emphasis on shared values, religious affinity or cultural specificity (as in the case of the Western Balkans) also highlights the untapped potential of *Russkiy Mir* and its influence. It validates the Russian state’s decisive choice to overlook markers of shared heritage to emphasise its broader geopolitical claims.¹²⁷

Scholarship on Russian influence in Central Asia suggests that *Russkiy Mir* operates as an adaptive but increasingly diminishing framework of civilisational projection. The Russian diaspora in the Central Asian republics is no longer able to generate the same influence as it did before the annexation of Crimea. As the Russian-speaking population declines in these regions and its influx of migrant labour to Russia decreases, Russia’s foothold in these nations is weakening. Moreover, growing competition from Western and Islamic cultural products, coupled with Russia’s own economic constraints, has limited the material foundations necessary for identity-based influence. As a result, *Russkiy Mir* has increasingly functioned as a preservative project aimed at maintaining linguistic and historical continuity rather than expanding Russia’s geopolitical narrative.¹²⁸

6. From 2014 to 2022: The Annexation of Crimea, the Invasion of Ukraine and the Transformation of Russkiy Mir

The narrative of *Russkiy Mir* has often been interpreted as the cause and primary driver of Russian Expansionism in the post-Soviet era. Nevertheless, upon closer examination, one

¹²⁷ Tomáš Kožnárek and Věra Stojarová, “Building Russkiy Mir On Patriarchate, n ,ine – Russia’s Competing Narratives,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* (2025): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2024.2448351>.

¹²⁸ Oleksiy Bondarenko, “‘Russkij Mir’, Between Diaspora and Public Diplomacy: Russia’s Foothold in Central Asia,” *Il Politico* 81, no. 3 (2016): 87–106, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45426839>.

realises that *Russkiy Mir*'s ability to mobilise Ukrainian society was impotent before 2014 and collapsed decisively thereafter. This section argues that the failure of *Russkiy Mir* as a tool of soft power following the annexation of Crimea contributed directly to its transformation into a coercive project by 2022, rather than actually being a successful ideology in its own right.³³

As Laruelle opines, *Russkiy Mir* was originally put forth as a cultural construct rather than a doctrine for expansion. It emphasised shared language, historical memory, and Orthodox Christianity as the basis of a transnational community extending beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. Crucially, this framework fits in perfectly with the logic of soft power¹⁶, which is the exercise of influence through cultural relatability, appealing to old civilisational identity and its attraction. The logically prior assumption for the same is that *Russkiy Mir* as a concept offers a distinct cultural affinity, particularly among Russian-speaking populations, which would at least translate into acquiescence to the Russian leadership.

However, a deeper look into Russian soft power in Ukraine suggests that these assumptions were flawed well before 2014. Studies published in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* show that the Ukrainian society exhibited deeply fragmented identities shaped by regional, linguistic, and political cleavages. Secondly, there was a growing sense of civic duty and the conception of a nationhood of Ukraine. Thirdly, a rise in the normative influence of both the EU and the United States, alongside large-scale cultural transmission from both, further weakened a landing space for these ideas. As a result of these preconditions, the use of Russian as a language was not effective amongst large segments of the population in Ukraine. Also, a largely contested and fragmented historical memory did not generate strong loyalty to Moscow either. These structural conditions limited the capacity of *Russkiy Mir* to operate as a genuine mobilising project; people simply did not choose to opt into it as a system of belief, reducing it to a narrative largely restricted to elite circles rather than mass societal uptake.

Ukraine occupies a prominent position within the conceptual architecture of *Russkiy Mir*, functioning not as a peripheral recipient of Russian influence but as a civilisational core whose inclusion is deemed necessary. Linguistic, historical, and religious narratives have been mobilised to assert an indivisible cultural unity, a claim reinforced through state-deployed institutions and the Russian Orthodoxy. Owing to its conservative ideology, *Russkiy Mir* is

backed by the Russian Orthodox Church. Its leader, Patriarch Kirill I, has not only actively supported the concept but further developed it. In his speeches, he seamlessly combines the ROC's canonical territory with the core of *Russkiy Mir*.¹²⁹ For him, the *Russkiy Mir* core consists of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.¹³⁰ Thus, the ROC's influence successfully attaches the conception of religion to the broader *Russkiy Mir* ideology. This strand of influence was present until 2019, when the new autocephalic Orthodox Church was founded in Ukraine. Independent of Moscow, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine is the largest in the country. Less than 10% of believers profess their allegiance to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which was earlier subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate. Post the invasion, even this allegiance has shifted, due to legal bans urging the UOC to sever its ties. With these developments, the ROC is bound to lose its canonical territory in Ukraine. Apart from the church, conservative circles like the Izborsk Club³⁰, whose members are right-wing Russian intellectuals, have played a key role in the expansion of this imperial ideology.¹³¹ Their members have referred to the Crimean annexation as a sacred reconnection and served as the intellectual architects who justified the 2022 invasion. The Club has called for the annexation of Russian-speaking parts of Ukraine, and finds the growing Western influence in Ukraine detrimental to Russia. Coinciding with the Patriarch's views, they too believe in Russia being a specific civilisation (opposed to the West), whose values carry on in all East Slavic peoples as the quintessential Russian spirit. This core is once again identified as Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.¹³²

However, empirical developments since 2014 reveal a growing divergence between cultural proximity and political loyalty, as growing bilingualism and shared historical context fail to translate into substantial outcomes.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 is a critical rupture which showcases the failure of the operationality of *Russkiy Mir*. While elite circles and the media in Russia repeatedly framed Crimea as “the return” of an integral part of what was true Russian civilisation, empirical evidence suggests that this instead marks the effective collapse of *Russkiy Mir* as an instrument of soft power in Ukraine. As Kuzio and Wawrzonek document in their analysis of the post-2014

¹²⁹ Thomas Bremer, ‘Diffuses Konzept. Die Russische Orthodoxe Kirche und die „Russische Welt“’.

¹³⁰ Patriarch Moskovskij i vseja Rusi Kirill, *Dialog s istoriej* (Moscow: Abris, 2019).

¹³¹ Marlene Laruelle, ‘The Izborsky Club, or the New Conservative Avant-Garde in Russia’, *The Russian Review*, 75, no. 4 (2016), pp. 626–644, <https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.12106>.

¹³² Aleksandr Prokhanov et al., *Doktrina Russkogo Mira* (Moscow, 2016), pp. 43–45.

period, Russian cultural and diaspora institutions, inclusive of both the Russkiy Mir Foundation and Rossotrudnichestvo, became increasingly securitised in the eyes of Ukrainian authorities and society. Cultural outreach was no longer observed as neutral, but rather as a prerequisite to territorial revisionism. Soft power relies on voluntary opt-in; the use of military force in Crimea and eastern Ukraine reframed soft cultural affiliation as a sign of political vulnerability. Rather than mobilising Ukrainian society in favour of Russia, Russkiy Mir increasingly triggered resistance, reinforcing Ukrainian civic identity even among Russian-speaking populations. Post-2014 survey data and political trends support this conclusion, indicating declining support for closer political alignment with Russia across most regions of Ukraine.

Therefore, it can be said that the failure of Russkiy Mir to generate accessibility and receive mass support was not incidental; rather, it was constitutive of the transformation that followed. Pizzolo's analysis of Russian soft power in Ukraine is particularly instructive in this regard. He argues that Russia's influence strategy did not gradually erode but instead suffered a "debacle," as these normative appeals lost credibility in the aftermath of Crimea. As a result of this, Russkiy Mir failed to continue as a persuasive framework and was increasingly redeployed as a state-led legitimising discourse in order to justify coercive actions.

This shift is evident in the evolving rhetoric of Russian state elites between 2014 and 2022. While the previous conception of Russkiy Mir focused on a joint sense of belonging and culture, later discourse began to portray the Russian World as the sole reincarnation and inheritor of an ancient civilisation now being threatened by NATO and the West. This converted Russkiy Mir into a narrative pushed by the Russian state, which now framed Ukraine as a site requiring correction within itself.

Recent scholarship in political geography also espouses a similar analysis of this mutation. Rather than abandoning Russkiy Mir as a failed tool of soft power, it was adapted into a rigid, hyper-ethnic and militarised call for civilisation. In this new form, it became compatible with large-scale violence, as coercion was reframed as inherently necessary for preservation. Importantly, this evolution did not resolve the earlier failure of mobilisation; it merely rendered mobilisation irrelevant. Loyalty was no longer expected to emerge organically but rather, to be simply acquired through political and military means. By the time of the full-scale invasion in

2022, *Russkiy Mir* had thus completed a functional transition. It no longer operated as a project aimed at cultivating identification among Ukrainian society. Instead, it served as an ideological scaffold that endowed coercive policies with moral and historical justification.

7. Conclusion

Russkiy Mir evolved from a cultural framework of soft power into a civilisational identity backed by a state-sponsored geopolitical ideology. *Russkiy Mir* or the “Russian World” operates along linguistic, cultural, historical and religious lines. This paper focuses on the shift in Russian foreign policy after the 2014 Crimean annexation and how it relates to the more recent Russia-Ukraine crisis. The paper aims to study *Russkiy Mir* as a legitimising narrative, deployed by the Kremlin to validate its coercive tendencies. Furthermore, the paper deals with the formation and works of the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation and its strategic operationalisation in Russian IR. The Crimean annexation, therefore, serves as a critical juncture for its analysis.

Russkiy Mir was originally established as a cultural construct which perfectly aligned with the logic of soft power. However, studies show that these assumptions were flawed. Ukrainian society, even before 2014, exhibited symptoms of identity fragmentation, a deepening sense of nationhood and rising normative influence from Western powers. These conditions reduced the mobilising capacity of *Russkiy Mir* into a redundant narrative. Following this, the 2014 annexation of Crimea cemented the failure of *Russkiy Mir* as an instrument of soft power. This transformation was completed after the 2022 invasion, wherein *Russkiy Mir* completely detached itself from its soft power strategy and adopted large-scale violence. What was once termed 'cultural affinity' now serves as moral justification.

The coercive deployment of *Russkiy Mir* to legitimise military intervention in Crimea and the full-scale invasion of 2022 rebounded against the state. Instead of growing proximity, it accelerated the rejection of the Russian language, culture, and historical symbolism within Ukraine. It gave impetus to the very thing it sought to quash; it has helped consolidate Ukrainian national identity and reinforced its decisive turn toward Europe.¹³³ Between 2014 and 2022,

¹³³ Meienberger, ‘The Concept of the “*Russkiy Mir*”’, 22.

Russkiy Mir evolved from a diffuse cultural framework into an increasingly legitimising narrative, institutionalised through state-sponsored organisations but unable to influence diplomatic bonds. As its cultural and demographic foundations eroded and its agencies prioritised symbolic presence over relational depth, the narrative was redeployed coercively (particularly in Ukraine), where its failure ultimately precipitated the collapse of the very civilisational space it sought to preserve.

State-sponsored institutions such as the Russkiy Mir Foundation and Rossotrudnichestvo played a crucial role in this shift by institutionalising the Kremlin's geopolitical narrative abroad. The Foundation's partnerships differed from country to country, with its operations being marked by opacity, lack of operative boundaries, unsustainable fiscal investments and standardised messaging. With respect to Ukraine, the Russian Orthodox Church occupies a special position in its propagation of the Russkiy Mir ideology. A question, however, remains to be further investigated: *does the ROC follow the Kremlin's agenda or vice versa?* Conservative circles consider Ukraine to be a core part of the ideology and are overtly critical of the West's growing influence over their neighbour. As a result, cultural outreach became part of a larger geopolitical narrative that portrayed Russia as a guardian and guarantor against an antagonistic West. In doing so, the narrative's earlier dependence on societal mobilisation was rendered irrelevant.

This study, therefore, argues that *Russkiy Mir* functioned as a legitimising framework that was adapted according to shifting geopolitical realities. Its trajectory explains the limitations of following a rigid civilisational agenda when lacking genuine societal consent. Ultimately, its coercive deployment accelerated resistance and undermined its initial strategy of consolidation.

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Directed Energy Technologies and the Stability–Instability Paradox in South Asia

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Abstract

Traditional methods of warfare are increasingly giving way to advanced, cost-effective, and precision-based technologies in contemporary military strategy. Direct Energy Weapons (DEWs), one such innovation, are weapons that employ concentrated electromagnetic energy to disable equipment and neutralise enemy personnel, and possess distinct characteristics that make them highly advantageous in modern warfare. With powers such as the U.S., Russia, and China investing in these capabilities, concerns have emerged about a technologically driven arms race and its strategic implications. This paper examines the paradoxical consequences of DEWs, promoted as precise and non-lethal alternatives to kinetic warfare, yet be a catalyst for heightened insecurity among states. It investigates whether such technologies enhance international security or magnify strategic instability under the “Stability-Instability Paradox”. The study considers DEWs speed, precision, and dual-use potential, categorises major systems under this technology, explores how anticipatory threat perceptions incentivize arms accumulation, draws parallels between weapons which are electromagnetic and weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), and assesses civilian vulnerabilities and regulatory gaps. South Asia is chosen as the focal region owing to the emergence of a complex security environment, historical rivalries, nuclear capabilities, and asymmetrical technological development, thus providing an illustrative lens for the strategic and policy implementations of DEWs.

Keywords: *Directed Energy Weapons (DEWs), Security Dilemma, Stability-Instability Paradox, Arms Accumulation, South Asia, Non-Kinetic Warfare, Policy Implementations*

1. Introduction

Directed Energy Weapons (DEWs) are systems that use concentrated electromagnetic energy rather than kinetic energy¹³⁴ to disable or destroy equipment, infrastructure, or personnel¹³⁵ through the process of heating, melting, or disrupting electronic systems.¹³⁶ They encompass various technologies, including High-Powered Microwaves (HPM), High-Energy Lasers (HEL), Charged Particle Beams (CPB), Neutral Particle Beams (NPB)¹³⁷, among others. Their key characteristics, such as speed of light operation, difficulty of interception, multi-platform integration across land, sea, air, space, ability to engage and neutralize multiple targets at once, and cost-effectiveness,¹³⁸ make them highly advantageous for modern warfare scenarios. These weapons span a spectrum, from non-lethal to lethal, with effects dependent on exposure time, distance, target characteristics, and operational conditions.¹³⁹

In contemporary security environments, militaries worldwide are allocating considerable resources towards the development of critical and emerging defence technologies to address the limitations presented by drones, rockets, and costly kinetic interceptors, while simultaneously expanding capability in space-based and layered defence infrastructure.¹⁴⁰ A key strategic advantage of DEWs lies in their potential to reverse unfavorable cost exchange between low-cost

¹³⁴ Jennifer DiMascio, Andrew Feickert, Ronald O'Rourke and Kelley M. Saylor, *Department of Defense Directed Energy Weapons: Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service Report R46925, 11 July 2024, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R46925>.

¹³⁵ Henry Obering, "Directed Energy Weapons Are Real . . . And Disruptive," PRISM 8, no. 3 (2020): 10. https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/prism/prism_8-3/prism_8-3_Obering_36-46.pdf.

¹³⁶ Anil Chopra, "Future is Directed Energy Weapons – India Fast Coming of Age," *Air Power Asia*, July 31, 2025, <https://airpowerasia.com/2025/07/31/future-is-directed-energy-weapons-india-fast-coming-of-age/>.

¹³⁷ D. Curtis Schleher, *Electronic Warfare in the Information Age* (Boston: Artech House Publishers, 1999), cited in "Role of Directed Energy Weapons (DEWs) in Shaping the Future of Warfare in South Asia," *Strategic Perspectives*, January 2025, <https://strategicperspectives.cissajk.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Role-of-Directed-Energy-Weapons-DEWs-in-Shaping-the-Future-of-Warfare-in-South-Asia.pdf>.

¹³⁸ Ibid., Table 1.1, "Characteristics of DEWs"

¹³⁹ Sarah Grand-Clément, "Directed Energy Weapons: A New Look at an 'Old' Technology," *UNIDIR*, 12 May 2022, <https://unidir.org/directed-energy-weapons-a-new-look-at-an-old-technology/>.

¹⁴⁰ Romică Cernat, "Directed Energy Weapons – Component of Disruptive Emerging Technology with Implications on Strategic Stability," *Romanian Military Thinking* 4, no. 4 (2024): 606–23, <https://en-gmr.mapn.ro/webroot/fileslib/upload/files/arhiva%20reviste/RMT/2024/4%202024/CERNAT.pdf>.

threats and expensive traditional kinetic interceptors (it costs approximately \$2 million per shot to take down a low-cost drone, whereas laser weapons like the UK’s DragonFire have been estimated to do the same for as little as approximately \$13 per shot¹⁴¹). DEWs also offer operational advantages in engagements and can engage multiple fast-moving threats without the logistical burden of resupply.¹⁴² This combination of economic efficiency, speed, and magazine depth (limited only by power availability) makes them a compelling complement to conventional defence systems, especially in scenarios with large numbers of inexpensive aerial threats.¹⁴³

Contemporary research highlights a growing “technological arms race” with economic giants like the U.S., Russia, and China forming an emerging “elite club” of DEW developers.¹⁴⁴ This raises a critical question: Do such technologies strengthen national and international security, or do they generate an illusion of stability that intensifies insecurity through the security dilemma?¹⁴⁵ This dynamic reflects the stability–instability paradox, where perceived strategic advantages generated by advanced technologies lower the threshold for competition and exacerbate insecurity despite claims of enhanced stability. The paper examines the contradictory role of DEWs by analysing the factors fueling this dilemma, with particular attention to “anticipatory threat” perceptions as catalysts for cascading strategic risks reminiscent of historical arms races involving WMDs. Focusing on South Asia, specifically the India-Pakistan-China triad, the study assesses whether indigenous development and deployment of DEWs have altered regional dynamics, and the extent to which accumulation is driven by reciprocal threat perceptions, while examining the security benefits and risks of highly complex, tightly coupled DEW systems, focusing on how regulatory gaps and operational challenges

¹⁴¹ Stuart Dee and James Black, “Directed Energy Dilemmas: Industrial Implications of a Military-Technological Revolution,” *RAND Corporation*, 20 February 2024, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/02/directed-energy-dilemmas-industrial-implications-of.html>.

¹⁴² Patty-Jane Geller, *The Use of Directed-Energy Weapons to Protect Critical Infrastructure* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 2023), pp. 4–6.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-10.

¹⁴⁴ Mike Yeo, Nigel Pittaway, Usman Ansari, Vivek Raghuvanshi and Chris Martin, “Hypersonic and directed-energy weapons: Who has them, and who’s winning the race in the Asia-Pacific?,” *Defense News*, 15 March 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2021/03/15/hypersonic-and-directed-energy-weapons-who-has-them-and-whos-winning-the-race-in-the-asia-pacific/>.

¹⁴⁵ Shiping Tang, “The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis,” *Security Studies* 18, no. 3 (2009): 587–623, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410903133050>.

shape civilian vulnerability and strategic dynamics within the triad. This paper employs a qualitative, theory-driven analysis of secondary sources, including strategic literature, policy documents, and doctrinal texts.

2. Background

2.1 Historical Emergence of Directed Energy Technologies

Emerging and Disruptive Technologies (EDT)¹⁴⁶, often framed as a post-Cold War concept, trace their intellectual lineage much earlier, from the 20th century, with the speculation about the charged-particle “teleforce” beams¹⁴⁷, World War II research revealed how microwaves could heat materials and interfere with electronics, planting the first practical seeds for non-kinetic weapon effects¹⁴⁸. The invention of the laser in the 1960s¹⁴⁹ grounded this concept, with the U.S. and USSR in a race to investigate such high-energy lasers, document early HEL experiments, and redefine the physics of modelling these scientific inventions. The turning point came post Ronald Reagan’s speech in 1983 on Strategic Defense Initiative, popularly dubbed as “Star Wars”, a defensive posture to shoot down ballistic missiles before they reached their targets¹⁵⁰, sending shockwaves across the globe.

2.2 Types and Characteristics of DEWs

Recent research focuses on the internal architecture of DEWs, examining how lasers, microwaves, and particle beams generate distinct operational effects. DEWs, as cited earlier, are of various categories like HEL, HPM, CPB, and NPB. The following table explains the characteristics of every category in detail and its functions.

¹⁴⁶ Allison Tan, “Emerging and Disruptive Technologies: New Weapons in the Making?”, *E-International Relations*, 17 June 2024, <https://www.e-ir.info/2024/06/17/emerging-and-disruptive-technologies-new-weapons-in-the-making/>

¹⁴⁷ *New York Times*, “Tesla, at 78, Bares New ‘Death-Beam’,” 11 July 1934, p. 18.

¹⁴⁸ Louis Brown, *A Radar History of World War II: Technical and Military Imperatives* (Institute of Physics Publishing, 1999), pp. 210–214.

¹⁴⁹ Jeff Hecht, *Beam: The Race to Make the Laser* (Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 145–170.

¹⁵⁰ Charles Stuart Kennedy, “The Strategic Defense Initiative — The Other ‘Star Wars’,” *Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST)*, 2015, <https://adst.org/2015/11/the-strategic-defense-initiative-the-other-star-wars/>.

Table 1.1: Characteristics, Operational Effects, Targets, and Limitations of DEW Types¹⁵¹

Category Name	Key Features	Operational Effect (Hard/Soft Kill; Lethal/Non-Lethal) ¹⁵²	Typical Targets	Limitations
HEL (Power Output = 1kW) ¹⁵³	High-power laser depositing thermal energy at speed of light; can damage metal and electronics	Hard kill (equipment), Soft kill (sensors); dual-use systems	Aimed at Airborne threats (drones, missiles, small UAVs) and ground-based targets	Weather-dependent, high power requirements, stable line-of-sight needed
HPM (Power Output = 100mW) ¹⁵⁴	Electromagnetic pulses to disrupt electronics; can affect multiple targets within beam area	Soft kill - disables electronics, Hard kill is rare; Usually non-lethal to personnel, lethal to electronics	Electronics-heavy systems on land, air, sea, mobile vehicles	Limited range, requires targeting precision, potential collateral electronic damage
CPB (Particle Energy~500 MeV-1GeV)	Stream of charged particles, near speed of light	Hard kill-destruction of material, soft kill rare; lethal in	Land- or space-based targets	Very complex, power-intensive, current range limitations

¹⁵¹ The table is made by the author based on her understanding of the subject.

¹⁵² Bonnie W. Johnson et al., “Counter Directed Energy Weapons and the Defense of Naval Unmanned Aerial Vehicles,” *Journal of Directed Energy* 7, Winter 2023, 166–67, https://nps.edu/documents/10180/142489929/JDE_7-2_Johnson.pdf.

¹⁵³ Chopra, “Future is Directed Energy Weapons...”.

¹⁵⁴ Chopra, “Future is Directed Energy Weapons...”.

		nature		
NPB (Particle Energy~100- 1000 MeV)	Beam of neutral particles, can penetrate atmosphere, precise in nature	Only hard kill-material destruction; lethal in nature	Space-based or high-value strategic targets	Experimental, technologically challenging, expensive

Other categories of DEWs, like Millimeter Waves (MMW) and Electromagnetic Pulse, have a direct impact on their targets.¹⁵⁵ DEWs integrate multiple core sub-systems, including a beam source (solid-state lasers and fiber-optic lasers), liquid-cooled high-energy systems,¹⁵⁶ power generation unit, thermal management system, and beam-control optics, whose configuration determines their performance and platform suitability.¹⁵⁷ Modern HEL and HPM systems are already mounted on ground vehicles (e.g. Stryker DE M-SHORAD)¹⁵⁸, naval destroyers (U.S. Navy Laser Weapon System), and aircraft-compatible pods such as DARPA's HELLADS modules.¹⁵⁹ DEWs pose both strategic and operational effects, strategic or non-military effects being the disruption of the adversary's communication systems (GPS, Navigation Satellites) and neutralising essential platforms to limit their reach. Operational effects include penetrating adversary air defence systems, disrupting command and control networks, poised to play a crucial role during wartime or crisis scenarios by delivering non-kinetic effects. They can also be useful in strategic signaling.¹⁶⁰ It is important to distinguish DEWs from Unmanned Aerial Systems like drones. While drones function as delivery platforms capable of

¹⁵⁵ Johnson et al., "Counter Directed Energy Weapons and the Defense of Naval UAVs," *JDE* 7, no. 2 (2023), p.166 Figure.3 'Types of DEW Threats'.

¹⁵⁶ Kelley M. Saylor, *Directed Energy Weapons: Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service Report R46458 (2020), pp. 5–9.

¹⁵⁷ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Directed Energy Weapons: Update on DoD Efforts to Develop and Field DEWs* (GAO-23-105813, 2023), pp. 8–15.

¹⁵⁸ U.S. Army RCCTO, *High Energy Laser and High-Power Microwave Overview* (2022), pp. 4–12.

¹⁵⁹ Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), *HELLADS Program Overview* (2021), pp. 1–3.

¹⁶⁰ Khurshid, *Role of Directed Energy Weapons*, pp.14-16.

carrying various payloads, DEWs refer specifically to weapon systems that transmit energy to disable or damage targets. Although DEWs may be mounted on drones, the two are conceptually and operationally distinct.¹⁶¹

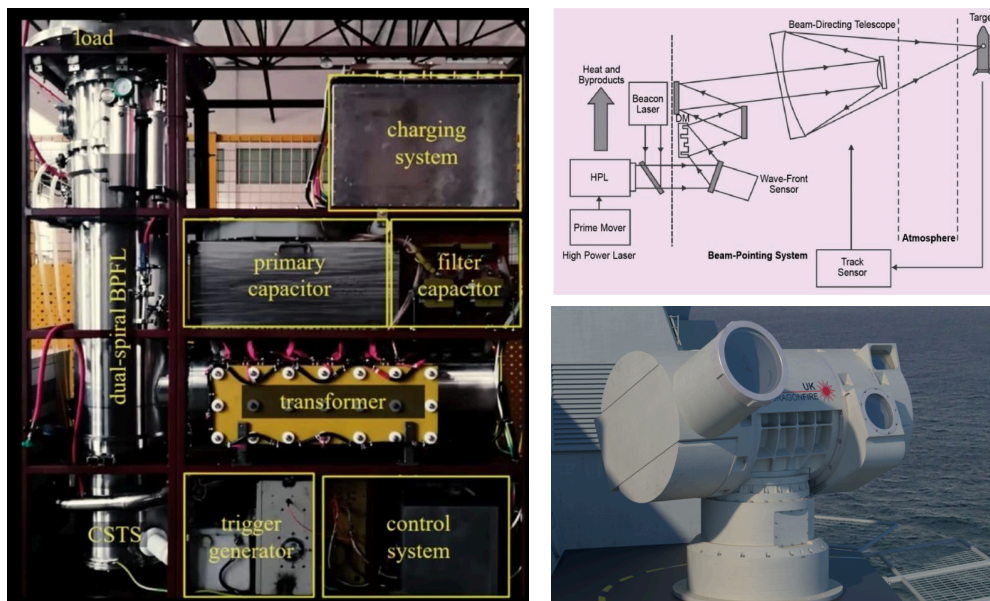


Fig.1: Internal Pulsed-Power System of a Chinese DEW model (BFPL)¹⁶²

Fig.2: Components of a laser-based DEW system¹⁶³

Fig.3: A model of the DragonFire Laser Beam Laser developed by the UK MOD installed on a Naval Ship¹⁶⁴

2.3 Contemporary Trends in DEW Development

The global development of DEWs reflects a rapidly intensifying technological arms race, where strategic imperatives drive states to pursue both offensive and defensive capabilities.

¹⁶¹ ‘How Directed Energy Weapons Are Revolutionizing Counter-UAV’, *Defence Industries*, 24 February 2025, <https://www.defence-industries.com/articles/how-directed-energy-weapons-are-revolutionizing-counter-uav>, accessed 27 February 2026.

¹⁶² 耿玖源 (Geng Jiuyuan), “10 GW 甘油介质双螺旋Blumlein脉冲形成线” (10 GW Glycerin Medium Double-Helix Blumlein Pulse Forming Line), *OpticsJournal.net*, 2023, Figure 11, <https://www.opticsjournal.net/Articles/OJ7bf4e7a239b66b97/FullText>.

¹⁶³ EFY Bureau, “Directed Energy Weapons: High-Energy Laser Weapons,” *Electronics For You*, 25 January 2017, Figure 6, <https://www.electronicsforu.com/technology-trends/directed-energy-weapons-laser-weapons>.

¹⁶⁴ *The Engineer*, “C2i 2024 Winner: Aerospace DragonFire Laser Weapon,” *The Engineer*, 5 March 2025, para. 3, <https://www.theengineer.co.uk/content/in-depth/c2i-2024-winner-aerospace-dragonfire-laser-weapon>.

China and Russia are widely considered leaders in the field, having operationalised select high-energy laser (HEL) and high-powered microwave (HPM) systems, and actively testing hypersonic delivery platforms to complement them. The United States, meanwhile, is advancing multiple service-specific programmes aimed at integrating DEWs across air, sea, and space domains, emphasizing rapid engagement, cost efficiency, and layered defence capabilities.¹⁶⁵ In the Asia-Pacific context, regional powers are actively engaging in both experimental and operational DEW programs; China has publicly demonstrated vehicle- and ship-mounted lasers, India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) has progressed on anti-drone laser systems such as DURGA II, and Australia has incorporated DEW research into its 2020 defence investment plans.¹⁶⁶ Pakistan is reported to be exploring cooperative projects with China and Turkey to accelerate its own DEW capabilities.¹⁶⁷ These trends highlight the diffusion of emerging technologies beyond traditional superpowers, as indicated by the Global Market Insights (GMI) report which estimates that the global DEW market was valued at roughly USD 6.7 billion in 2024 and is projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of around 17.6 percent through 2034, reflecting rising military investments in advanced defence technologies, increasing emphasis on counter-UAV capabilities, and strategic defence initiatives by multiple states.¹⁶⁸ Contemporary military doctrines no longer treat DEWs as isolated technological novelties; rather are integrated as embedded capabilities within multi-domain, networked force structures. The report by the National Defense Industrial Association (2024) on directed energy integration describes DEWs as key enablers in layered defence and joint operational constructs, aligning with broader shifts toward information-dominant and

¹⁶⁵ Syed Bahadur Abbas et al., "Hypersonic and Directed-Energy Weapons: A New Arms Race," *International Relations Insights & Analysis*, October 2021, <https://www.ir-ia.com/Hypersonics-DEW-Global-Arms-Race.html>.

¹⁶⁶ Mike Yeo et al., "Hypersonic and directed-energy weapons: Who has them, and who's winning the race in the Asia-Pacific?," *Defense News*, 15 March 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2021/03/15/hypersonic-and-directed-energy-weapons-who-has-them-and-whos-winning-the-race-in-the-asia-pacific/>.

¹⁶⁷ Zhao Ziwen, "Pakistan interested in Chinese laser weapons, former navy commander says," *South China Morning Post*, 23 September 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3326563/pakistan-interested-chinese-laser-weapons-former-navy-commander-says>.

¹⁶⁸ *Directed Energy Weapons Market – By Product Type, By Technology, By Platform, By Application and Forecast, 2025–2034*, Global Market Insights Inc., December 2024, <https://www.gminsights.com/industry-analysis/directed-energy-weapons-market>.

rapid-decision frameworks in modern warfare, potentially aligning with the means of Fifth Generation Warfare.¹⁶⁹

While confirmed battlefield use of DEWs remains limited, there is growing discussion about their operational deployment. For instance, several defence analyses have reported that laser-based systems may have been tested in the ongoing Russia–Ukraine conflict, especially in counter-drone roles.¹⁷⁰ Some unverified reports suggest engagement with Iranian-made Shahed drones using such systems¹⁷¹, though independent verification of battlefield effects is still constrained by the fog of war and open-source limitations. Regardless, this growing acknowledgment of DEW testing and threat signals underlines their shifting status from experimental programmes to increasingly visible components of contemporary military arsenals.

2.4 Repetition of Strategic Patterns: Parallels between DEWs and WMD Accumulation

The emerging race behind DEWs is a new variant of the arms accumulation seen post the culmination of World War II, as these patterns mirror earlier cycles of strategic competition¹⁷² i.e sustained rivalry between states devoid of an open declaration of war but there is the presence of competitive political, economic, and military actions to seek advantage over the other. One of the

¹⁶⁹ National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA), *Directed Energy Weapon Supply Chains: Directed Energy Weapon Report* (NDIA 2024) <https://www.ndia.org/-/media/ndia-eti/reports/directed-energy-weapon-supply-chains/directedenergyweaponsreportdecti.pdf> accessed 6 February 2026.

¹⁷⁰ Monir Ghaedi, ‘Russia’s laser weapon in Ukraine: does it exist?’, *Deutsche Welle*, 22 May 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-laser-weapon-in-ukraine-does-it-exist/a-61883096>, accessed 27 February 2026. The article cites Pentagon spokesman John Kirby stating: “We don’t have any indication of the use of lasers, at least weaponized lasers, in Ukraine. Nothing to confirm on that.”

¹⁷¹ Christopher Plain, ‘Powerful Combat Laser Could Be Latest Game Changer in Ukraine-Russia Conflict’, *The Debrief*, 25 March 2025, <https://thedebrief.org/powerful-combat-laser-could-be-latest-game-changer-in-ukraine-russia-conflict/>, accessed 27 February 2026.

¹⁷² “What Is ‘Strategic Competition’ and Are We Still in It?,” *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 2 February 2024, <https://saisreview.sais.jhu.edu/what-is-strategic-competition-and-are-we-still-in-it/>.

driving reasons for the proliferation is the anticipatory threat¹⁷³, in simple words, it is the uncertainty surrounding an adversary state's intentions, which feeds fear and competitive behaviour to preserve one's security even when direct threats are ambiguous.¹⁷⁴ Below is the graphical representation drawing parallels with the accumulation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and the accumulation of DEWs to illustrate the trend similarities and the list of nations coming under a similar bracket seen in both lists.

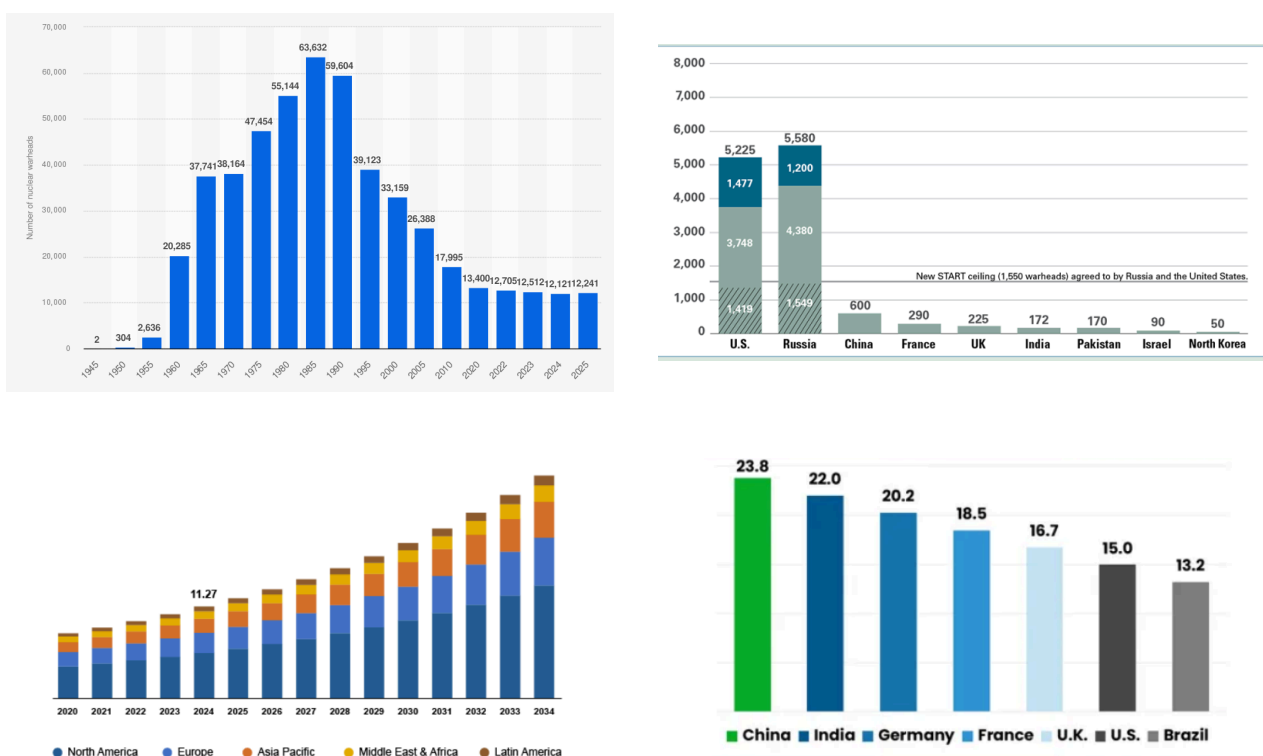


Fig. 4: Data showing the global nuclear warhead accumulation from 1945 to 2025¹⁷⁵ (Fig.4.1, top left); current nuclear arsenal possessed by states¹⁷⁶ (Fig.4.2, top right); DEW

¹⁷³ J. La Bella, "Attack of the Anti-Satellite Weapons in Anticipatory Self-Defense," *University of the Pacific Law Review* 52, no. 4 (2021): 731–62, <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1364&context=uoplawreview>.

¹⁷⁴ Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, "Fear in International Politics: The Long Shadow of State," *E-International Relations*, 22 September 2020, <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/09/22/fear-in-international-politics-the-long-shadow-of-state/>.

¹⁷⁵ SIPRI, *Nuclear Forces Database*, 2025, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/nuclear-forces>.

¹⁷⁶ Arms Control Association, "Nuclear Weapons: Who Has What at a Glance," *Arms Control Association Fact Sheet*, January 2025, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/nuclear-weapons-who-has-what-glance>.

market growth projection¹⁷⁷ (Fig.4.3, bottom left); Global DEW market share by various nations developing these technologies as of 2024¹⁷⁸ (Fig.4.4, bottom right)

2.5 DEWs as High-Risk Technologies & the Systemic Risks Posed

The upward trend seen in terms of mass weapon accumulation stands as a matter of concern. DEW technologies are highly complex i.e., the components of the system interact in a non-linear manner, the internal workings of the system are hard to see and functions on multiple feedback loops; and are tightly coupled, which shows it is crucially dependent on the factor of time (time-critical process), sub-systems follow rigid sequences, and there are small-to-no buffers for human intervention.¹⁷⁹ The systems which are characterised by high complexity and tight coupling can be classified as “high risk technologies”, which Charles Perrow highlights as a part of the “Normal Accident Theory” (NAT).¹⁸⁰ NAT posits that in high-risk systems, accidents are inevitable even when every reasonable safety measure is applied, the reason being they have interdependent parts and non-linear interactions that any minute failure can unexpectedly interact with other functional systems, triggering a domino effect which cannot be fully anticipated or controlled; thus major accidents are a normal consequence owing to the system’s structure as a whole and not just the result of isolated errors.¹⁸¹ In the context of DEW operations, it poses many risks that can produce unintended consequences or accidents. If these systems are not incorporated with the necessary care or safety checks, there is a high chance of misalignment of targets, which can affect friendly assets or civilian systems in the vicinity, causing significant collateral damage.¹⁸² Unexpected interactions between subsystems, feedback loops, or environmental conditions can degrade performance or trigger runaway system behavior. Military

¹⁷⁷ Polaris Market Research, *Directed Energy Weapons Market Analysis*, 2025, <https://www.polarismarketresearch.com/industry-analysis/directed-energy-weapons-market>.

¹⁷⁸ Future Market Insights, *Directed Energy Weapons Market Report*, 2025, <https://www.futuremarketinsights.com/reports/directed-energy-weapons-market>.

¹⁷⁹ Charles Perrow, *Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Science & Tech Spotlight: Directed Energy Weapons*, GAO-23-106717 (Washington, DC: GAO, 25 May 2023), <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-106717>.

deployment also raises escalation concerns. Permanent damage inflicted by DEWs on critical systems like satellites or electronics may be interpreted as an act of force, potentially provoking retaliatory responses and escalation even if the original intent was defensive or non-lethal¹⁸³, thus human errors can amplify the crisis (e.g: potential misuse for nefarious purposes) and by the time human intervention is sought, most of the times the damage is already done and is irreversible.

2.6 Civilian Exposure & the Uncertain Human Effects of DEWs

The potential exposure of civilian populations to unintended effects of DEW systems constitutes a critical area of uncertainty, introducing significant uncertainty into assessments of their operational and ethical implications. The U.S. Government Accountability Office notes that because they use electromagnetic radiation rather than physical projectiles, the range of long-term effects on humans and non-combatants is still being studied, and this uncertainty itself raises ethical concerns about deployment before effects are fully understood. Short-term effects from systems like millimeter-wave crowd control devices can include intense skin heating or discomfort, but the GAO emphasizes that health impacts depend on exposure duration and intensity.¹⁸⁴ Public health authorities acknowledge that different DEW types pose different hazards. For example, laser exposure can cause eye injury or blindness and skin burns if directed at people, while other forms of electromagnetic energy may penetrate tissue to varying degrees depending on wavelength and strength.¹⁸⁵ High-power sub-millisecond radio frequency energy pulses have been demonstrated to be able to induce neurological and neuropathological changes in the brain, with the study being in developmental stages.¹⁸⁶

2.7 Regulatory Gaps & International Law: The LAWS Debate under the CCW

¹⁸³ Jennifer DiMascio, Andrew Feickert, Ronald O'Rourke and Kelley M. Saylor, *Department of Defense Directed Energy Weapons: Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report R46925 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 11 July 2024), <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R46925>.

¹⁸⁴ GAO, *Science & Tech Spotlight: Directed Energy Weapons*, Challenge section (health concerns).

¹⁸⁵ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Directed Energy," *Public Health*, last updated 1 September 2023, https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/directed_energy.asp.

¹⁸⁶ Omid Yaghmazadeh, "Pulsed High-Power Radio Frequency Energy Can Cause Non-Thermal Harmful Effects on the Brain," *arXiv* (preprint), 7 Sep 2023, arXiv:2309.03479, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2309.03479>.

The risks outlined above gain greater significance when placed against the backdrop of an almost complete absence of regulatory frameworks governing these technologies. This sector is expanding rapidly, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, and major defence firms like Lockheed Martin are already fielding DEW-based systems within branches of the U.S. military.¹⁸⁷ Despite this, existing instruments such as the Arms Trade Treaty (2014)¹⁸⁸ regulate the transfer of conventional weapons systems but do not explicitly address emerging, non-kinetic technologies such as unmanned systems or directed energy capabilities.¹⁸⁹

The primary multilateral legal framework that engages with directed energy-related systems is the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW),¹⁹⁰ particularly the ongoing deliberations on Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) within the Group of Governmental Experts.¹⁹¹ Although DEWs are not inherently autonomous, their increasing integration with AI-enabled tracking, targeting, and engagement systems situates them within the broader concerns articulated in LAWS debates about meaningful human control, accountability, and escalation risks.

Within the CCW framework, Protocol IV on Blinding Laser Weapons¹⁹²(1995) remains the only binding legal instrument directly addressing a specific category of directed energy effects, prohibiting weapons designed to cause permanent blindness. However, this protocol's narrow scope does not extend to other DEW modalities such as high-powered microwaves or particle beam weapons, nor does it address systems that rely on algorithmic decision-support or

¹⁸⁷ Siddharth Chaturvedi, "Bringing Directed Energy Weapons within the Purview of the Arms Control Regime," *NUALS Law Journal*, 25 July 2023, <https://nualslawjournal.com/2023/07/25/bringing-directed-energy-weapons-within-the-purview-of-the-arms-control-regime/>.

¹⁸⁸ United Nations, *The Arms Trade Treaty*, adopted 2 April 2013, entered into force 24 December 2014, <https://www.thearmstradetreaty.org/hyper-images/file/TheArmsTradeTreaty1/TheArmsTradeTreaty.pdf>.

¹⁸⁹ Chaturvedi, "Bringing Directed Energy Weapons within the Purview of the Arms Control Regime," *NUALS Law Journal*.

¹⁹⁰ United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, *Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW)*, <https://www.unoda.org/en/our-work/conventional-arms/convention-certain-conventional-weapons>.

¹⁹¹ United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, *Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems* (UNODA, 2025) <https://disarmament.unoda.org/en/our-work/emerging-challenges/lethal-autonomous-weapon-systems> accessed 6 February 2026.

¹⁹² *Protocol on Blinding Laser Weapons* (Protocol IV to the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects), adopted 13 October 1995, entered into force 30 July 1998, UNTS vol. 1380, p. 370, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.43_CCW%20P-IV.pdf.

automated engagement processes. Thus, it becomes necessary to have a separate arms control regime.¹⁹³

This regulatory asymmetry is further underscored by ongoing LAWS discussions: while autonomous weapons face sustained international scrutiny, DEWs, despite posing comparable risks of decision compression, unintended harm, and crisis escalation, remain largely unregulated. As a result, no comprehensive or universally ratified arms control regime governs the development, deployment, or transfer of DEWs, leaving a significant gap in international humanitarian law. In South Asia, where DEW research and procurement are in initial stages, there is a heightened risk of regional arms races and uncontrolled proliferation owing to this vacuum.

3. Literature Review

3.1 DEWs through Doctrinal Perspectives

Scholarship on DEWs has progressively moved beyond questions of technical feasibility toward broader strategic and doctrinal analysis. Recent peer-reviewed studies situate laser and microwave systems within layered air and missile defence architectures, emphasising their growing operational relevance in countering saturation threats and easing reliance on costly kinetic interceptors. Policy-oriented research from institutions such as RAND Europe similarly highlights how sustained investment in DEWs reflects shifting military priorities toward rapid, non-kinetic engagement and integrated force structures.¹⁹⁴ Emerging work on future warfare further suggests that the deployment of high-speed directed energy capabilities compresses decision cycles and reshapes command and control practices.¹⁹⁵ Despite this expanding literature, limited attention has been paid to how DEWs interact with foundational international security frameworks, particularly the stability–instability paradox, a gap this paper seeks to address.

¹⁹³ Chaturvedi, “Bringing Directed Energy Weapons within the Purview of the Arms Control Regime,” *NUALS Law Journal*.

¹⁹⁴ James Black, *Directed Energy: The Focus on Laser Weapons Intensifies*, RAND Corporation, 25 January 2024, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/01/directed-energy-the-focus-on-laser-weapons-intensifies.html> (accessed 6 February 2026).

¹⁹⁵ *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters*, Vol. 48, No. 4, Winter 2018–19 (US Army War College Press, 2019) <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2600&context=parameters> accessed 6 February 2026.

3.2 Peaceful on the Surface, Perilous Within: The Stability-Instability Paradox

Scholars attribute the persistence of conventional violence either in a nuclear South Asia or a Cold-War torn Europe to the “stability/instability paradox”, which states that the presence of nuclear weapons reduces the likelihood of a full-scale war, but paradoxically makes lower-level conventional conflicts more probable.¹⁹⁶ Originally proposed by Glenn Snyder in 1965, the central point of his essay was that conventional and nuclear balances interact in a variety of ways, and sometimes to contradictory effects, thus disputing the notion that the balance of terror negates traditional balance of power concepts based on conventional military force.¹⁹⁷ “The point is often made in the strategic literature that the greater the stability of the ‘strategic’ balance of terror, the lower the stability of the overall balance at its lower levels of violence” as argued by Snyder suggests an additional hint that the logic of the stability-instability hypothesis may work in reverse too, as he quoted, “But one could argue precisely the opposite – that the greater the likelihood of gradual escalation due to a stable strategic equilibrium tends to deter both conventional provocation and tactical nuclear strikes – thus stabilizing the overall balance”.¹⁹⁸ In essence, Snyder was proposing a logic that was far more complex and uncertain i.e though stability at the strategic level could reduce stability at lower levels, the threat of escalation can also deter lower levels of violence. Thus, stability at the strategic level can have both effects: it may increase the risk of lower-level instability, but – given the possibility of escalation – can also create stability at lower levels.¹⁹⁹ Similarly, Jervis notes that ‘the extent that the military balance is stable at the level of all-out nuclear war, it will become less stable at lower levels of

¹⁹⁶ Michael Krepon and Julia Thompson, “India and Pakistan’s Unstable Peace: Why Nuclear South Asia Is Not Cold War Europe,” *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, Harvard Kennedy School, 2026, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/india-and-pakistans-unstable-peace-why-nuclear-south-asia-not-cold-war-europe>.

¹⁹⁷ Varun Sahni, “India-Pakistan Crises and the Stability-Instability Paradox: A Less Than Perfect Explanation,” in Easwaran Sridharan (Ed), *Deterrence Theory, International Relations Theory and the India-Pakistan Conflict* (New Delhi: Routledge, forthcoming).

¹⁹⁸ Glenn H. Snyder, “The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror,” in Paul Seabury (Ed.) *The Balance of Power* (Scranton: Chandler, 1965), p. 199. Original italics.

¹⁹⁹ Sahni, “India-Pakistan Crises and the Stability-Instability Paradox.”

violence.²⁰⁰ It is the availability of this strategic space between low-intensity warfare and the threat of a nuclear holocaust that has resulted in the conceptualisation of theories of a “limited war” and “escalation.”²⁰¹

However, there were parallel views by scholars on this paradox who did not agree with Snyder’s views, highlighting the varied understandings of the concept of deterrence²⁰² in nuclear terminology. Lawrence Freedman has aptly pointed out that, “Strategies were not so much means of asserting control over situations but ways of coping with situations in which nobody was in total control.”²⁰³ He argued that deterrence strategy “is a gift to strategists in that its nature and workings remain so elusive and so imperfectly understood as to permit endless speculation with little danger of empirical refutation”.²⁰⁴ Vipin Narang, building on Snyder’s argument of lower-level instability, critiques the conventional application of this paradox in IR literature, arguing that it is either often misunderstood or oversimplified. He emphasizes that the paradox is not a resultant outcome of nuclear possession; rather, its manifestation depends on how states structure their nuclear forces, posture them strategically, and integrate them into broader doctrines. In his view, it is context-dependent and conditional, highlighting the need to examine underlying strategic choices rather than assuming uniform effects and outcomes.²⁰⁵ By analysing the scholarly views on this topic, it can be assumed that the Stability-Instability Paradox is more useful in deciphering the tussle between strategic stability and lower-level conflict. In terms of its scope apart from the nuclear umbrella belt, is found to be conditional, probabilistic and heavily dependent on context, with the same outcome of restraint not seen in all scenarios even between

²⁰⁰ Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy*, p. 31.

²⁰¹ Ibid, p.32.

²⁰² James Johnson, “Revisiting the ‘Stability–Instability Paradox’ in AI-Enabled Warfare: A Modern-Day Promethean Tragedy Under the Nuclear Shadow?,” *Review of International Studies*, published online 20 November 2024, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/review-of-international-studies/article/revisiting-the-stabilityinstability-paradox-in-ai-enabled-warfare-a-modern-day-promethean-tragedy-under-the-nuclear-shadow/BDEB90A611EBC0A9B3EF846DFF2135E5>.

²⁰³ Zafar Khan, *South Asian Strategic Paradox: India-Pakistan Nuclear Flux*, *Journal of ...* 2015, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48527459>.

²⁰⁴ Keith B. Payne, “Deterrence and Stability Beyond ‘New START’,” *New Paradigms Forum* (guest blog), 17 August 2011, <https://www.newparadigmsforum.com/p1029>.

²⁰⁵ Vipin Narang, *Posturing for Peace: Pakistan’s Nuclear Postures and South Asian Stability* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2014), 3–5.

rival nations who possess nuclear warheads (e.g: the Kargil War, 1999 between India and Pakistan, which occurred just a year after Pakistan conducted its first nuclear tests immediately after Pokran II tests in 1998).²⁰⁶ As a corollary, the credible threat of nuclear retaliation (or second-strike capability) provides states with the perception of freedom of manoeuvre to engage in brinkmanship²⁰⁷, limited wars (including the use of tactical nuclear weapons), proxy wars, and other forms of low-level provocation.²⁰⁸ This interpretation of the paradox, also known as the red-line model, remains dominant in the strategic literature and policymaking circles.²⁰⁹ The red-line model establishes a strategic ceiling created by secure second-strike forces, while the brinkmanship model explains how states manipulate the risks inherent in that ceiling.

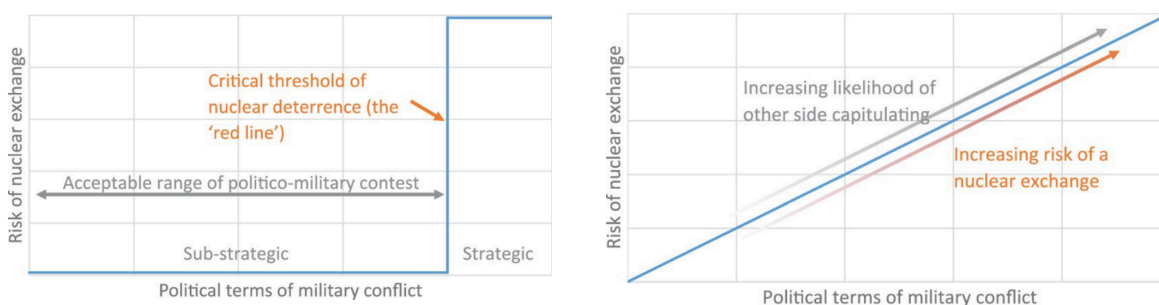


Fig. 5.1: The 'red-line' model of the stability–instability paradox.²¹⁰

Fig. 5.2: The 'brinkmanship' model of the stability–instability paradox.²¹¹

3.3 Can DEWs be included under this Paradox?

²⁰⁶ Sumit Ganguly, *The Kargil Conflict: Causes and Consequences* (London: Routledge, 2001), 45–47.

²⁰⁷ Christopher J. Watterson, "Competing Interpretations of the Stability-Instability Paradox: The Case of the Kargil War," *The Nonproliferation Review* 24, no. 1–2 (2017): 83–99, Model 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2017.1366623>.

²⁰⁸ (Johnson, *Revisiting the Stability–Instability Paradox*, para. fn. 27).

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ Watterson, "Competing Interpretations of the Stability-Instability Paradox.", Figure 1.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, Figure 2.

The paradox is a concept rooted in nuclear deterrence theory, which emerged from the analysis of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)²¹², and is tied exclusively to nuclear weapons because only such arsenals produced the combination of catastrophic destructive potential and credible second-strike capability necessary to create a stable strategic ceiling. As stated by both Jervis²¹³ and Freedman²¹⁴, no other weapons system generates this distinctive deterrent environment. Another probable factor that has a major hand in explaining this accumulation behaviour is the emotion of fear. An American psychologist, Robert Plutchik, in 1980 created a wheel of emotions to showcase how emotions are connected, and depicted three variations of a primary emotion based on the degree of stimuli and context.²¹⁵ With fear as the primary emotion, apprehension is classified as the mildest form of fear, and terror at the opposite end of the spectrum, and fear can mix with other emotions like anger, disgust, grief, and many more, triggering actions accordingly.²¹⁶ Fear intersects with concerns over power, status, and survival, both at the individual and state levels. In the context of military competition, the perception that a rival state is gaining technological, strategic, or conventional advantage triggers fear of losing dominance, deterrent credibility, or a stable geopolitical influence, thus triggering insecurity among states, motivating preemptive arms accumulation, rapid adoption of new weapons, or provocative actions designed to reassert control.

Answering the question of whether DEWs have the potential to invoke such kind of fear, it must be understood that fear of destabilisation does not stem only from destructive capability, but also from speed, opacity, and psychological effects. Studies of AI-enabled warfare argue that autonomous and high-speed systems compress decision-making windows and introduce escalation risks that traditional deterrence frameworks cannot easily absorb.²¹⁷ Similarly,

²¹² “Nuclear Strategy: Mutually Assured Destruction,” *USA History Timeline*, <https://www.usahistorytimeline.com/pages/nuclear-strategy-mutually-assured-destruction-42e2cc39.php>.

²¹³ Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

²¹⁴ Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

²¹⁵ Six Seconds, “Plutchik’s Wheel of Emotions: Exploring the Feelings Wheel and How to Use It,” *Six Seconds*, 6 February 2025, <https://www.6seconds.org/2025/02/06/plutchik-wheel-emotions/>.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ Revisiting the Stability-Instability Paradox in AI-Enabled Warfare: A Modern-Day Promethean Tragedy under the Nuclear Shadow, *Review of International Studies*, Cambridge University Press, 2024, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/review-of-international-studies/article/revisiting-the-stabilityinstability-paradox-in-ai-enabled-warfare-a-modern-day-promethean-tragedy-under-the-nuclear-shadow>.

analyses of EDT emphasise that such systems erode trust, create strategic ambiguity, and often provoke insecurity rather than stability, since states fear technological asymmetry and escalation through misperception.²¹⁸ Using this reasoning, DEWs, though not WMDs, do possess characteristics that could generate comparable psychological pressures. Their near-instantaneous effects, precision, low detectability, and potential for grey-zone use create an environment where states may fear surprise, technological lag, or covert escalation. The main question is not whether DEWs replicate nuclear-level destruction, but whether they can replicate the old-school insecurity, miscalculation risks, and arms-race pressures that give this paradox its strategic potency. Thus, it can be assumed that DEWs, developed with the intention to equip nation states with emerging state-of-the-art technology which can prove to be useful for military offense and civilian defense, especially during the changing times from traditional warfare to technology-led era; are also the source for evoking emotions of fear and insecurity which drives global actions, and have the potential to become destabilising machinery in near future if their expansion and use remains unchecked.

4. High-Energy Rivalry in South Asia: DEWs as a Novel Catalyst

Bringing the attention towards the region of South Asia, especially on the nations which have already developed and deployed to some extent these technologies into their militaries i.e China and India, with India joining the “elite club of four” recently in April 2025;²¹⁹ and the alternate parallel nation Pakistan which possesses nuclear arsenal and now is on the search for obtaining the technology from China. South Asia’s strategic landscape in contemporary history has been influenced by interlocking rivalries, asymmetric power balances, and crises under the nuclear shadow, with this triad forming the core of the region’s evolving security dynamics and the basis for examining how DEWs may interact with long-standing patterns of competition.

[adox-in-ai-enabled-warfare-a-modern-day-promethean-tragedy-under-the-nuclear-shadow/BDEB90A611EBC0A9B3EF846DFF2135E5.](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/drdo-tests-directed-energy-weapon-system-that-can-disable-drones-missile/article69446266.ece)

²¹⁸Allison Tan, ‘Emerging and Disruptive Technologies’, *E-International Relations*, 17 June 2024.

²¹⁹ Bureau, *The Hindu*, “DRDO Tests Directed Energy Weapon System That Can Disable Drones, Missiles,” *The Hindu*, 13 April 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/drdo-tests-directed-energy-weapon-system-that-can-disable-drones-missile/article69446266.ece>.

The current environment within the region has been shaped by two overlapping rivalries: India and Pakistan; India and China. The engagement between India and Pakistan has been sour, due to a traumatic partition in 1947 and the unresolved dispute of Jammu and Kashmir, resulting in both nations viewing each other as arch enemies. Decades of crises that escalated into wars (1947-48, 1965, 1971, and 1999), combined with persistent cross-border militancy and the nuclearisation of 1998, deepened a security dilemma in which both India and Pakistan came to interpret the other's military modernisation as inherently threatening.²²⁰ This dynamic has been especially pronounced on the Pakistani side, where a weaker conventional position has long produced an India-centric strategic orientation. As a result, Islamabad's foreign and security policies have increasingly been shaped in reactive terms, i.e., interpreting Indian actions, whether stabilising or escalatory, through the lens of perceived vulnerability.²²¹ The India-China tensions, although of different origin and nature, underline territorial border disputes and strategic mistrust in a similar manner. These tensions occasionally resulted in wars, like the 1962 Indo-China War, skirmishes, and repeated standoffs along the Line of Actual Control, with major incidents being the Doklam Crisis (2017) and Galwan Valley Clash (2020). China's rapid military-technological modernisation has reinforced India's perception of a long-term systemic challenger. Regional security studies reports provide detailed documentation on China's development and deployment of high-energy lasers, anti-satellite (ASAT) DEWs, and counter-space capabilities, placing China among the leading states alongside the US and Russia in early operationalisation of DEWs,²²² thus indirectly shaping India's drive to accelerate its own indigenous capabilities.²²³

India, China, and Pakistan are all developing DEWs with varying levels of progress. Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) has tested high-energy lasers like the Mk-II(A) against drones and sensors and is advancing microwave-based systems such as KALI,

²²⁰ Michael Krepon and Nathaniel Cohn, *The Stability–Instability Paradox in South Asia* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2005), <https://www.stimson.org/2005/stability-instability-paradox-south-asia/>.

²²¹ Maria Sultan et al., *India's Conventional and Nuclear Doctrine: A Threat to Pakistan's Deterrence* (Islamabad: Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, 2014), https://www.issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/1299649036_25635225.pdf.

²²² Khurshid, "Role of Directed Energy Weapons in Shaping the Future of Warfare in South Asia."

²²³ Chopra, "Future is Directed Energy Weapons...".

aiming for more powerful tactical and airborne applications.²²⁴ China is pursuing high-power laser and microwave weapons as part of its broader military modernization and emphasizing its robust research and development, influencing regional defence strategies.²²⁵ Pakistan's DEW development is less publicly documented and appears driven largely by regional strategic pressures. Pakistani analysts and strategy papers argue that Islamabad is compelled to pursue DEWs to counter Indian capabilities, statements from Pakistani military leaders mention intentions to integrate laser-based DEWs on naval platforms acquired from China,²²⁶ and the nation is exploring DEWs to defeat small drones and counter Indian offensive systems.

The emergence of DEWs in a volatile region like South Asia intensifies this security dilemma, as seen in the above cases, on how a comparatively weaker power started developing and procuring such weapons, prompting reactive policies instead of reciprocal, particularly from Pakistan in response to India; and from India in response to both China and Pakistan. While DEWs heighten the perception of vulnerability and could trigger an arms race in advanced technologies, their precise, tactical, and often defensive nature may actually lower the likelihood of full-scale war, since each state can signal strength without immediately resorting to kinetic conflict. This dynamic exemplifies the stability–instability paradox in the region. While China has advanced significantly in directed energy research and military modernization, the application of the Stability–Instability Paradox must account for structural asymmetries between regional dyads. The India–Pakistan rivalry presents a more immediate case of mutual nuclear deterrence operating within compressed geographical and crisis timelines, making it a more appropriate framework for examining instability at lower thresholds.

5. The Causal Effects of DEWs

DEWs pose hard-hitting cascade effects, as a result of the intersection between the system's technical and operational characteristics, which can unintentionally dictate the

²²⁴ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "What are India's plans for directed energy weapons?" ORF, 25 September 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/what-are-indias-plans-for-directed-energy-weapons>.

²²⁵ Khurshid, "Role of Directed Energy Weapons in Shaping the Future of Warfare in South Asia."

²²⁶ Zhao Ziwen, "Pakistan interested in Chinese laser weapons, former navy commander says," South China Morning Post, 23 September 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3326563/pakistan-interested-chinese-laser-weapons-former-navy-commander-says>.

geopolitical mandate and, to a large extent, define the manner of interaction between nation-states. The following points aim to solidify the same, giving a grounded base for the cause-and-effect narrative.

1. **Arms Race and Proliferation Measures:** Strategic analysts note that new military technologies can spur action-reaction cycles, heightening fears and uncertainties and incentivising rivals to accelerate their own systems development, creating technological asymmetry. The pattern resembles how hypersonics and cyber weapons have already driven qualitative buildups in key regions.²²⁷ Emerging technologies are associated with increased motives for first-strike or competitive modernisation, creating conditions for quantitative and qualitative arms accumulation.²²⁸
2. **Grey-Zone Warfare and Tactical Ambiguity:** Majority of DEWs are non-kinetic,²²⁹ thus making them attractive weaponry for grey-zone operations, which refers to espionage of adversaries' essential data and systems like disabling sensors, temporary jamming.²³⁰ Ambiguous military activities can be provocative while not clearly crossing into declared conflict, yet they create pressure on rival states to respond or prepare, contributing to rising escalation. Analysis of related counterspace and electronic warfare activities shows such technologies are already a preferred tool in the modern-day conflict spaces.²³¹ The predominantly non-kinetic nature of DEWs enables coercion, strategic signaling, and disruption, allowing states to apply pressure below the threshold of conventional or nuclear escalation while still shaping adversary behaviour.
3. **Lack of Regulatory and Legal Frameworks:** Unlike nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons, DEWs lack clear legal or normative frameworks, leaving states without

²²⁷ Michael J. Mazarr et al., *Disrupting Deterrence: Examining the Effects of Technologies on Strategic Deterrence in the 21st Century*, RAND Corporation Research Report (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2022), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA500/RRA595-1/RAND_RRA595-1.pdf.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Francesco Ancona, “Astropolitics and Weaponisation of Space—Drawing Past Lessons to Address Space Arms’ Escalation”, *Frontiers in Political Science* 7 (2025): 1653205, <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/political-science/articles/10.3389/fpos.2025.1653205/full>.

²³⁰ U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), *Conflict in the Gray Zone: A Prevailing Geopolitical Dynamic Through 2030* (Washington, D.C.: National Intelligence Council, July 2024), <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIC-Unclassified-Conflict-In-The-Gray-Zone-July2024.pdf>.

²³¹ Ancona, “Astropolitics and Weaponisation of Space.”

constraints, verification mechanisms, or confidence-building measures for their development and deployment. Existing instruments such as Protocol IV under the CCW,²³² which prohibits only blinding laser weapons, address a narrow category of effects and do not regulate broader DEW capabilities, leaving room for unchecked proliferation and strategic mistrust that incentivises states to hedge through capability expansion. Such an issue is known as the “pacing problem,” a common phenomenon seen with emerging technologies. The question lies as to how quickly and effectively the regulatory laws will catch up with such niche fields without regulating too rigidly or too loosely.²³³

4. **Compression of Time and Space:** DEWs come under high-risk technologies and tend to operate at near-instantaneous speeds, covering vast distances with minimal warning. The rapid speed and reach of DEWs compress decision-making, creating a security dilemma that drives pre-emptive actions, arms accumulation, and heightened strategic instability. Even defensive deployments in high-speed or long-range systems can appear threatening, illustrating how a state’s protective measures may unintentionally provoke rivals.²³⁴

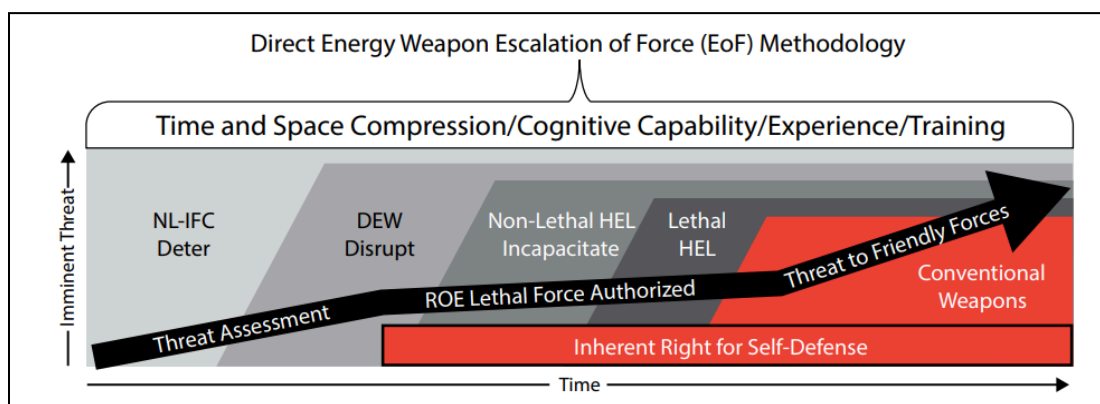


Fig.6: Methodology of DEW escalation-of-force²³⁵

²³² Protocol on Blinding Laser Weapons (Protocol IV to the CCW).

²³³ Gary Marchant, “Why Soft Law is the Best Way to Approach the Pacing Problem in AI,” *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs*, 29 September 2021, <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/media/article/why-soft-law-is-the-best-way-to-approach-the-pacing-problem-in-ai>.

²³⁴ Alfred Cannin, “Directed-Energy Weapons: An Option for Strategic De-Escalation,” *Air & Space Power Journal* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2021), https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/ASPJ/journals/Volume-35_Issue-3/T-Cannin.pdf.

²³⁵ Ibid.

Strategic Recommendations for Indian National Security Imperatives

Below are straightforward recommendations suggested for Indian military units within the South Asian context for an effective and safe incorporation of this technology:

1. Deploy DEWs primarily for defensive and denial roles (like counter-UAS, sensor protection) to manage grey-zone threats from Pakistan and China without risking massive escalation.
2. Use calibrated DEW employment more as a signaling mechanism, incorporating proportional responses to sub-conventional provocations while preserving escalation control.
3. Prioritise counter-ISR and surveillance denial capabilities to contest Chinese monitoring and reconnaissance during prolonged standoffs along the LAC.
4. Integrate DEWs into joint air-defence and theatre command structures, avoiding isolated technological deployment and ensuring coherence.
5. Enhance resilience and redundancy of Indian sensors and space assets against laser and microwave interference from technologically advanced adversaries.
6. Pursue indigenous, incremental DEW development under DRDO leadership, treating them as complementary capabilities rather than substitutes for kinetic deterrence.

6. Conclusion

Directed Energy Weapons represent a transformative yet double-edged development in modern warfare. While they offer precision, rapid response, and novel capabilities, their psychological, strategic, and technological implications echo the dynamics of the stability-instability paradox, particularly in South Asia. India and China's induction of DEWs, alongside Pakistan's pursuit of comparable capabilities, demonstrates how emerging technologies can exacerbate insecurity, trigger arms races, and strain regional stability under opaque and minimally regulated conditions. The absence of comprehensive legal and normative frameworks further magnifies these risks. As states navigate this evolving landscape, measured strategic foresight, international cooperation, and adaptive policy instruments will be essential to harness the security potential of DEWs without fueling spirals of mistrust and escalation.

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All Under the Party Central Committee:
Influence and the Boundaries of the Chinese Diasporic Self

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Abstract

This paper examines how the Communist Party of China governs segments of the global Chinese diaspora beyond territorial jurisdiction. It addresses a core puzzle in contemporary international politics: why many diaspora members in liberal democracies moderate speech and political participation despite holding full legal citizenship rights. The paper theorises Digital Tianxia as a mechanism-based model of extraterritorial rule that links three processes: jurisdictional recoding, infrastructural enclosure, and coercive deterrence. The paper contributes a unified explanation that connects securitisation theory, ontological security, diaspora governance, and digital authoritarianism. It argues that Digital Tianxia is a testable model of transnational political control with direct implications for democratic resilience and diaspora rights protection.

Methodologically, the study uses a qualitative causal design from 2018 to 2025. It combines critical discourse analysis of Party and United Front texts, digital ethnography of Chinese-language platform ecologies, and process tracing across three structured subcases: repression of critics, disciplining of students, and narrative control in WeChat-centred communication spaces. The empirical corpus integrates institutional documents, legal texts,

organisational records, platform materials, repression datasets, and host-state inquiry records. The findings support a sequenced causal chain. At the macro level, securitised Party discourse and legal-institutional consolidation expand the political remit of overseas work. At the meso level, United Front-linked brokerage networks translate central priorities into community norms through category work and social sanction. At the micro level, platform dependence and perceived transnational risk produce anticipatory self-censorship, political withdrawal, and reduced identity pluralism. The study shows that legal citizenship and political vulnerability can coexist in liberal settings.

Keywords: *Digital-Tianxia; diaspora; securitisation; ontological-security; UFWD; WeChat; repression; extraterritoriality.*

1. Introduction

The Chinese party-state (which is the People's Republic of China) exercises influence over overseas Chinese communities through a governance system that no longer stops at territorial borders.²³⁶ In a seminal speech delivered in September 2014, Xi Jinping, who is also the President of the PRC and General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, explicitly identified United Front Work Department's (UFWD) work as a 'fundamental guarantee' for achieving the Party's strategic objectives, marking the beginning of an era in which the management of the overseas Chinese diaspora, or *qiaowu*, was systematically elevated to a core task of national security and foreign policy.²³⁷ This system combines political organisation, digital infrastructure, and coercive reach. It also targets identity formation, not only behaviour. The key puzzle is clear. Why do people who hold legal citizenship in liberal democracies still regulate speech and political activity as if they remain under the direct authority of the Communist Party of China's Central Committee? Existing work on foreign interference

²³⁶ The People's Republic of China (or the Chinese People's Republic) would hence be referred to as the PRC or the Party-state.

²³⁷ Anne-Marie Brady, *Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 2017), p. 8. The Communist Party of China is also referred to as the Party in the essay, along with its official abbreviation, CPC.

identifies covert influence operations, and work on digital authoritarianism tracks technology diffusion, but neither fully explains how a party-state can convert dispersed ethnicity into durable extraterritorial political compliance.²³⁸

This paper addresses that gap by theorising Digital *Tianxia* as a mode of rule. This paper argues that the Communist Party of China (CPC) governs the global Chinese diaspora through a macro-to-micro system of Digital *Tianxia* that recasts ethnicity as jurisdiction, institutionalises control through the UFD of the Central Committee of the CPC and platform infrastructures, and enforces compliance through transnational repression; it contributes a causal model that links this governance architecture to measurable outcomes of self-censorship and constrained diasporic agency in liberal democracies. The concept captures a shift from territorially bounded governance to digitally mediated authority that travels through institutions, platforms, and social ties. The argument starts from two observations. First, Beijing has expanded the political remit of overseas work and has integrated diaspora governance more tightly into Party structures. Second, diasporic communication now occurs inside platform ecologies that allow surveillance, narrative filtering, and behavioural steering at scale.²³⁹ These developments create a governance field in which legal citizenship in host states and political vulnerability to the PRC can coexist.

2. Literature Review

The literature provides robust components for the central argument, and all gaps are addressed through the theoretical integration of Digital *Tianxia*. Existing studies usually isolate security discourse, institutions, coercion, or platforms. They rarely connect these levels in one causal account of extraterritorial compliance. Security theory provides the first anchor. Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde show that securitisation shifts an issue from normal politics into emergency politics

²³⁸ Anne-Marie Brady, *Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 2017), p. 2.

Fiona B. Adamson and Enze Han, 'Diasporic Geopolitics: Rising Powers and the Future of International Order', *Review of International Studies*, 50 (2024), p. 489.

Alina Polyakova and Chris Meserole, 'Exporting Digital Authoritarianism: The Russian and Chinese Models' (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2019).

²³⁹ Wanning Sun and Haiqing Yu (eds), *WeChat and the Chinese Diaspora: Digital Transnationalism in the Era of China's Rise* (London: Routledge, 2022); Chi Zhang, 'WeChatting American Politics: Misinformation and Political Polarization in the Immigrant Chinese Media Ecosystem', in Sun and Yu (eds), p. 129.

and authorises exceptional measures.²⁴⁰ Mitzen then adds a micro foundation. She argues that political actors seek ontological security through routines that stabilise identity under uncertainty.²⁴¹ Together, these works explain why diaspora members may prioritise identity stability over formal rights in liberal democracies.

Diaspora governance scholarship provides the institutional bridge. Gamlen shows that sending states build diaspora institutions to tap resources, embrace external populations, and govern them through policy and symbolic incorporation.²⁴² Adamson and Han extend this logic and show that rising powers now treat diasporas as geopolitical instruments that project influence across borders through social and organisational channels.²⁴³ This literature clarifies how party-linked organisations can mediate authority inside host societies without formal jurisdiction.

Research on transnational authoritarianism identifies the coercive repertoire. Tsourapas argues that autocracies combine legitimisation, co-optation, and repression across borders.²⁴⁴ Freedom House shows how this repertoire includes digital intimidation and coercion by proxy against family members in the country of origin.²⁴⁵ Digital governance scholarship clarifies the infrastructural layer. Santaniello conceptualises digital sovereignty as control over

²⁴⁰ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), p. 23.

²⁴¹ Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12.3 (2006), pp. 342, 346–47.

²⁴² Alan Gamlen, 'Diaspora Institutions and Diaspora Governance', *International Migration Review*, 48 (2014), pp. 191–94.

²⁴³ Fiona B. Adamson and Enze Han, 'Diasporic Geopolitics, Rising Powers, and the Future of International Order', *Review of International Studies*, 50.3 (2024), pp. 477, 479–82.

²⁴⁴ Gerasimos Tsourapas, 'Global Autocracies: Strategies of Transnational Repression, Legitimation, and Co-optation in World Politics', *International Studies Review*, 23.3 (2021), pp. 620–23.

²⁴⁵ Yana Gorokhovskaia, Grady Vaughan and Nate Schenkkan, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2021), pp. 4, 8.

infrastructures, data, and standards.²⁴⁶ Work on WeChat further shows how platform design can create enclosed communication environments that narrow pluralistic debate.²⁴⁷

3. Methodology

This paper uses a mechanism-based qualitative design to explain how the Communist Party of China governs segments of the Chinese diaspora beyond territorial jurisdiction. The design links macro strategy, meso institutions, and micro behaviour in one causal chain. The outcome is treated as a contraction of diasporic political autonomy in liberal democracies. It is observed in outcomes of self-censorship, political withdrawal, and reduced identity pluralism. The explanatory variable, Digital *Tianxia*, is defined as combining infrastructural enclosure and coercive deterrence. This approach follows securitisation logic, because the Party frames diaspora politics as a security field that requires exceptional intervention, and it follows ontological security logic, because governance targets routine, anxiety, and identity continuity rather than only formal compliance.

The scope is from 2018 to 2025. Although Xi Jinping elevated UFWD work to a central political task in 2014, the four-year period marks tighter integration of diaspora work into Party strategy; it was in 2018 that these changes were formalised.²⁴⁸ The focus is on diaspora spaces in liberal democracies where legal citizenship rights and transnational vulnerability coexist. There are three empirical domains as structured subcases: repression of critics, disciplining of students, and narrative control in Chinese-language platform ecologies. The selection of these domains is based on the observation that each strongly activates one mechanism while still allowing cross-mechanism overlap. This structure lets us test causal sequencing instead of only listing incidents.

²⁴⁶ Mauro Santaniello, 'Attributes of Digital Sovereignty: A Conceptual Framework', *Geopolitics* (2023), pp. 3–6.

²⁴⁷ Chi Zhang, 'WeChatting American Politics: Misinformation and Political Polarization in the Immigrant Chinese Media Ecosystem', in Wanning Sun and Haiqing Yu (eds), *WeChat and the Chinese Diaspora: Digital Transnationalism in the Era of China's Rise* (London: Routledge, 2022), p. 119.

²⁴⁸ Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, *Plan for Deepening the Reform of Party and State Institutions* (2018); Center for Security and Emerging Technology translation (2019).
https://cset.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/t0280_PRC_reform_plan_2018_EN.pdf

We organise the framework at three levels. At the macro level, the model regime's security and discourse power are examined as strategic goals. At the meso level, it is traced how the UFWD system and diaspora organisations transmit authority through category work, network brokerage, and community leadership channels. At the micro level, how platform dependence and perceived risk shape speech decisions in everyday life is examined. This levelled design allows us to show how systemic objectives become local behavioural constraints through concrete intermediaries.

A multi-method strategy with three components is applied. First, a critical discourse analysis of Party texts, policy language, and institutional directives is conducted. Security framing, national rejuvenation framing, and boundary terms such as *huaqiao*, *huaren*, and *qiaobao* are looked at here.²⁴⁹ Second, a digital ethnography of diaspora platform environments, with special attention to WeChat public accounts and group communication norms, is conducted. Suppression, narrative convergence, and social sanction patterns are tracked in this section. For the third part, there is a process tracing across the three subcases to test whether the mechanisms appear in the predicted order.

There is a corpus in six layers. Layer one contains Party speeches and UFWD documents. Layer two contains legal and administrative texts on diaspora governance. Layer three contains open-source records from diaspora organisations and student associations. Layer four contains platform material from WeChat ecosystems, including public posts, account moderation events, and recirculated political content. Layer five contains transnational repression datasets and incident reports from rights organisations and policy institutes. Layer six contains host-state inquiries and court or policing records, where available. We believe this layered corpus provides institutional, informational, and behavioural evidence in one design.

Each mechanism with explicit observable implications is operationalised. For Mechanism 1, which is jurisdictional recoding, we expect policy and organisational language that treats ethnicity as a political category that can override host-state citizenship. We also expect evidence

²⁴⁹ In PRC policy usage, *huaqiao* denotes Chinese nationals residing abroad, whereas *huaren* denotes persons of Chinese descent who hold foreign citizenship. *Qiaobao* is a broader political label for “Chinese compatriots overseas.” *Qiaowu* refers to “overseas Chinese affairs” work, including the administrative apparatus that manages overseas Chinese policy.

For reference: James Jiann Hua To, *Qiaowu: Extra-Territorial Policies for the Overseas Chinese* (2014), pp. 1, 111; Leo Suryadinata, *The Rise of China and the Chinese Overseas: A Study of Beijing's Changing Policy in Southeast Asia and Beyond* (2017), glossary, pp. ix–x.

that Party-linked actors inside civil associations transmit political direction while presenting themselves as community service actors. For Mechanism 2, which is infrastructural enclosure, we expect high reliance on WeChat for news and mobilisation, low issue diversity, and recurring avoidance of politically sensitive content. We also expect evidence that users internalise moderation risk and adapt speech in anticipation. For Mechanism 3, which is coercive deterrence, we expect incidents of cross-border intimidation, coercion through family members, and credible fear that shifts behaviour towards silence or coded communication.

There is a test of the causal chain through process-tracing tests. First, apply hoop tests to verify that each stage precedes the next. Then, a smoking-gun test, where evidence is highly unlikely under rival explanations, is applied. The expected sequence is: macro security framing authorises meso institutional penetration, meso penetration creates micro dependence and risk perception, and micro adaptation produces measurable self-censorship and reduced public dissent. We retain the main theory only when evidence supports sequencing and mechanism interaction better than rivals.

4. Macro-Meso-Micro Framework

Macro level Analysis

The central mechanism of Digital *Tianxia* begins at the macro level with a change in state purpose. The Party does not treat overseas Chinese policy as ordinary consular outreach. It treats it as a security field that links regime durability, narrative control, and strategic competition. In securitisation terms, this shift matters because it relocates diaspora politics from normal bargaining into an exceptional register. It allows actors to justify interventions that would otherwise appear illegitimate in host polities.²⁵⁰

At the doctrinal level, this turn appears in Party language that elevates United Front work as a strategic instrument for national rejuvenation. The logic is not simply representational. It is operational. Once the Party frames overseas Chinese affairs as part of national security and

²⁵⁰ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), pp. 23-26.

political struggle, it can assign institutional mandates, intelligence-adjacent obligations, and performance targets to organisations that operate beyond PRC territory.²⁵¹

The 2018 party-state reforms gave this strategy a durable institutional form by transferring key overseas Chinese affairs functions into the United Front system. That reorganisation tightened command pathways between central Party leadership and diaspora-facing work. It reduced the distance between symbolic co-ethnic outreach and political direction. The institutional effect is crucial for causal inference. Without centralisation, local actors might still attempt influence operations, but they would lack standardised authority channels and policy coherence.²⁵²

Legal architecture complements this organisational turn. Article 7 of the National Intelligence Law places broad obligations on organisations and citizens to support state intelligence work. Article 38 of the Hong Kong National Security Law asserts extraterritorial reach over conduct committed abroad by non-residents. These legal moves do not create full overseas jurisdiction in a formal Westphalian sense. They do create a claim structure that travels with ethnicity, networks, and political expression. That claim structure increases perceived risk among diaspora populations, especially when combined with observed enforcement against critics and families.²⁵³

The macro logic, therefore, rests on a dual move. First, the Party reclassifies diaspora politics as regime security. Second, it overlays this classification with institutional and legal instruments that can operate transnationally through brokers, platforms, and deterrence signals. This dual move prepares the ground for meso and micro mechanisms. It also explains why the outcome variable should be defined as a contraction of autonomy rather than a simple attitude change. The

²⁵¹ U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *China's Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States* (Washington, DC, 2018), pp. 3-6.

²⁵² Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, *Plan for Deepening the Reform of Party and State Institutions* (2018); Center for Security and Emerging Technology translation (2019), pp. 9-10.
https://cset.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/t0280_PRC_reform_plan_2018_EN.pdf

²⁵³ Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, *National Intelligence Law of the PRC* (2017), art. 7 (English translation in DigiChina compilation), p. 3.
<https://digichina.stanford.edu/work/translation-cybersecurity-law-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-effective-june-1-2017/>
Law of the PRC on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong SAR (2020), art. 38 (quoted in UK Home Office CPIN, 2025), p. 10
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/china-country-policy-and-information-notes/country-policy-and-information-note-hong-kong-national-security-legislation-china-april-2025>

system does not only seek persuasion. It seeks predictable limits on what people say, organise, and contest in liberal settings.

Meso level Analysis

At the meso level, Digital *Tianxia* operates through organisations that mediate between Party strategy and diaspora social life. This layer does not rely on formal territorial jurisdiction. It relies on brokerage, reputational authority, and networked coordination inside host societies. The UK Intelligence and Security Committee identifies a shift towards more directed CPC-linked interference activity and highlights United Front structures as central instruments in overseas influence work.²⁵⁴

The key meso mechanism is institutional translation. Central doctrine frames overseas Chinese politics as part of national security and national rejuvenation. Local intermediaries then convert abstract doctrine into practical community norms. They define acceptable speech. They shape event access. They activate coordinated responses when politically sensitive issues emerge. They frame dissent as harmful to collective dignity or social stability. This translation process constrains behaviour even when no direct coercive act appears in public view.²⁵⁵

A second meso mechanism is category management. Brokerage organisations often combine welfare, cultural, and representational roles. This creates role duality. The same actor can provide social support and then enforce political boundaries when geopolitical tensions rise. In analytic terms, this is not a contradiction. It is the operational form of embedded governance. It allows political signalling to circulate through trusted community channels while maintaining deniability in legal and diplomatic settings.²⁵⁶

A third meso mechanism is cross-domain coordination. Evidence from host-state inquiries shows recurring overlap between civic associations, student networks, and communication infrastructures during contentious episodes. The Canadian foreign interference inquiry

²⁵⁴ Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, *China* (HC 74, London, 2023), pp. 45, 116.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 106-109.

²⁵⁶ Alan Gamlen, 'Diaspora Institutions and Diaspora Governance', *International Migration Review*, 48:1 (2014), pp. 184-188.

documents concern about transnational repression signals travelling through community channels. It stresses that the issue is not the total capture of all associations. The issue is the existence of Party-linked pathways that can be activated selectively in liberal democracies.²⁵⁷

Campus politics provides a high-visibility meso site. US policy reporting documents cases where student organisations monitored criticism of the CPC, coordinated counter-mobilisation, and in some cases, enabled pressure that extended towards relatives in China. This does not mean every Chinese student association acts as a Party proxy. It does show that some organisations can function as disciplinary brokers under specific political conditions.²⁵⁸

The meso-level observable implications follow directly. If this mechanism is active, a recurring organisational overlap across civic and educational spaces, rapid norm enforcement during sensitive events, and brokerage behaviour that precedes individual withdrawal should be observed. There should also be discourse that reframes political conformity as community protection. These patterns convert macro strategy into local behavioural expectations before any micro-level adaptation becomes visible.²⁵⁹

Micro level Analysis

At the micro level, the central question concerns decision-making under overlapping authority. Individuals in liberal democracies retain legal rights, yet many still self-regulate political expression. The model explains this through anticipatory adaptation. Actors calculate expected costs across legal, social, familial, and digital domains. They do not need to reject liberal rights. They only need to believe that visible dissent may trigger cross-border consequences.²⁶⁰

The first micro mechanism is risk internalisation. Individuals observe intimidation incidents, reputational attacks, and family-linked coercion. They then update their behaviour. They reduce

²⁵⁷ Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions, *Final Report, Volume 1* (Ottawa, 2025), pp. 99-100, 107.

²⁵⁸ U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *China's Global Police State* (Washington, DC, 2023), pp. 8-9, 14-15.

²⁵⁹ Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference, *Final Report, Volume 1*, pp. 99-107.

²⁶⁰ Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 342-347.

visibility, avoid contentious events, and shift from explicit critique to safer language. Freedom House documents this pattern in China-linked transnational repression cases and shows how coercion by proxy against relatives functions as a credible deterrent beyond territorial borders.²⁶¹

The second micro mechanism is platform-conditioned speech. Diaspora communication often depends on tightly networked digital ecosystems that combine messaging, news circulation, and community coordination. Open Technology Fund's technical assessment of WeChat shows persistent censorship logic and governance dynamics that affect international users and can feed into censorship system training. This architecture produces anticipatory compliance because users learn which terms and topics generate friction.²⁶²

The third micro mechanism is identity stabilisation under uncertainty. Ontological security theory predicts that actors seek routine and predictability when political risk rises. In this context, silence becomes a strategy of self-preservation. Individuals preserve social belonging and family safety by narrowing public identity claims. They do not necessarily change private beliefs. They change public performance to reduce exposure.²⁶³

Student testimony supports this micro pathway. Amnesty's 2024 report records fear of monitoring, concern for family members in China, and classroom self-censorship among students in liberal democracies. These reports capture precisely the behavioural outcomes that the framework predicts, which are topic avoidance, coded speech, event non-participation, and divergence between private conviction and public expression.²⁶⁴

Micro-level variation also follows from the model. Behavioural constraint intensifies when four conditions combine: high dependence on PRC-linked digital platforms, dense local social monitoring, close family exposure in China, and high public visibility. The constraint weakens when these conditions relax. This conditional pattern strengthens causal inference because it

²⁶¹ Freedom House, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression* (Washington, DC, 2021), pp. 15-17, 22-24.

²⁶² Open Technology Fund, *We Chat, They Watch: How International Users Unwittingly Build up WeChat's Chinese Censorship Apparatus* (Washington, DC, 2023), pp. 2, 15.

²⁶³ Mitzen, 'Ontological Security in World Politics', pp. 347-350.

²⁶⁴ Amnesty International, *On My Campus, I Am Afraid: China's Targeting of Overseas Students Stifles Rights* (London, 2024), pp. 5, 18, 31, 54.

shows mechanism activation, not deterministic uniform control.²⁶⁵ The micro outcome is therefore not total ideological conversion. The measurable outcome is the contraction of diasporic political autonomy. Actors retain formal rights but exercise them unevenly under persistent transnational risk. In methodological terms, this is observable as patterned self-censorship and reduced identity pluralism across comparable liberal contexts.²⁶⁶

From an ontological security perspective, this architecture also targets the conditions of everyday certainty. Actors adapt most reliably when governance reshapes routine rather than imposing constant overt coercion. If people learn that certain topics produce social, legal, or familial danger, then silence becomes a stabilising routine. Over time, this routine can survive even when formal coercion is absent. That is the core reason why the framework should treat identity, risk anticipation, and repetition as causal rather than epiphenomenal.²⁶⁷

Mechanism 1: jurisdictional recoding from citizenship to ethnicity

In this mechanism, the Party does not treat overseas Chinese in host states as fully external to its political remit. Instead, it overlays legal citizenship with a political category anchored in descent, culture, and civilisational belonging. This is why the *qiaowu* vocabulary is analytically significant. PRC discourse distinguishes among *huaqiao*, *huaren*, and related categories, yet policy practice applies these distinctions with administrative flexibility whenever political mobilisation is strategically useful.²⁶⁸

James To's analysis shows that PRC policy has long recognised that *huaren* lie outside formal PRC jurisdiction, while still declining to treat them as ordinary foreigners in political practice. This ambiguity is not accidental. It functions as a governance resource. It allows Beijing to deny legal overreach when challenged by host governments, while preserving a normative and

²⁶⁵ Freedom House, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach*, pp. 18-24.

²⁶⁶ Amnesty International, *On My Campus, I Am Afraid*, pp. 31-54; Freedom House, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach*, pp. 15-24.

²⁶⁷ Mitzen, 'Ontological Security in World Politics', pp. 342-347

²⁶⁸ James Jiann Hua To, *Qiaowu: Extra-Territorial Policies for the Overseas Chinese* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 108-113.

organisational claim over broad overseas Chinese populations. In theoretical terms, ethnicity becomes a portable jurisdictional cue rather than a fixed cultural descriptor.²⁶⁹

This recoding also appears in the political treatment of diaspora identity as a strategic asset. The state seeks to cultivate affective and symbolic attachment to the “motherland,” then convert attachment into behavioural expectations. The expectations include narrative discipline, reputational defence of the Party, and selective mobilisation during perceived political crises. This pattern aligns with diaspora geopolitics scholarship: sending states increasingly treat diasporas as instruments of external power projection, not just as remittance or investment communities.²⁷⁰

The analytical value of jurisdictional recoding is clear. It explains why legal citizenship in liberal democracies does not automatically generate liberal political behaviour. The core puzzle is the coexistence of full formal rights with constrained diasporic agency. When individuals perceive an overlapping field of authority, legal rights remain intact but cease to determine expected behaviour on their own. Decision-making becomes plural and layered. Family location, visa status, travel risk, social reputation, and platform visibility all shape political choices alongside constitutional protections.

Process-tracing expectation follows directly. If Mechanism 1 is active, it should be observed in discourse and organisational practice that frames overseas Chinese as politically addressable by Party institutions, regardless of host citizenship. There must also be intermediaries presenting political direction as cultural care, community service, or anti-discrimination support. The corpus is well-suited to test this because Party documents, diaspora association records, and host-state inquiries can reveal category work and brokerage language at scale.²⁷¹

²⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 111-113.

²⁷⁰ Fiona B. Adamson and Emma M. Han, ‘Diasporic Geopolitics: Rising Powers and the Future of International Order’, *International Affairs*, 100:1 (2024), pp. 190-193.

²⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 201-206; To, *Qiaowu*, pp. 122-126.

Mechanism 2: meso institutional transmission through the United Front and allied organisations

The second stage converts macro strategy into community-level governance. The United Front system operates as a brokerage architecture that connects central Party priorities to local associations, student networks, business chambers, media nodes, and event infrastructures. This process does not depend on constant clandestine command. It depends on repeated contact, reputational sorting, and selective access to symbolic and material resources that incentivise compliant brokers.

Gamlen’s work on diaspora institutions offers a strong analytic bridge here. States can “embrace” and “govern” populations abroad through institutions that appear administrative or cultural while still producing political effects. In the PRC case, this institutional repertoire intersects with Party-led United Front practice and therefore carries stronger regime-security content than standard emigrant engagement models.²⁷²

Empirically, host-state inquiries now document this meso layer with increasing clarity. The UK Intelligence and Security Committee describes a shift towards more assertive interference behaviour aligned with CPC objectives. Canadian inquiry material discusses concerns about transnational policing and the diffusion of PRC-linked enforcement signals through community channels. US policy reporting similarly describes coordination with student and community organisations to counter dissent events and shape local narratives. These findings do not imply that all Chinese associations are Party-directed. They do show that Party-linked institutional pathways exist and operate across multiple liberal democracies.²⁷³

This is where the second hoop test becomes powerful. If meso transmission is causal, consistent intermediaries across issue areas should be seen: critics, student politics, and media narration. There should also be strategic role duality. The same broker can organise benign cultural events, facilitate community services, and activate political boundary enforcement when sensitive issues

²⁷² Alan Gamlen, ‘Diaspora Institutions and Diaspora Governance’, *International Migration Review* (2014), pp. 181-188.

²⁷³ Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (UK), *China* (HC 588, 2023-24), p. 193; Commission of Inquiry into Foreign Interference (Canada), *Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference: Final Report*, vol. 1 (2025), p. 139; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2025 Annual Report*, pp. 523-532.

arise. Such duality often obscures causality in public debate because it allows plausible deniability. Mechanism-based analysis restores clarity by tracking function, sequence, and outcome rather than intent declarations alone.

The meso layer also produces social sanction capacity. Community leaders, student officers, and chat administrators can stigmatise dissent as disloyal, risky, or harmful to group interests. This social policing often precedes any direct state coercion. It lowers the cost of control for the originating state because communities internalise enforcement norms. In ontological security terms, this matters because sanction risk destabilises everyday identity routines. Actors then seek safety by reducing political visibility, curating speech, and avoiding high-salience events.²⁷⁴

Subcase A: repression of critics and the logic of coercive deterrence

The first empirical subcase activates Mechanism 3 most directly. Transnational repression targets dissidents, activists, journalists, and politically visible community members through harassment, surveillance, legal intimidation, coercion by proxy, and threats to relatives in the country of origin. Freedom House documents China as one of the most active origin states in this domain across many host countries. The reports show a sustained pattern rather than isolated incidents.²⁷⁵

The causal relevance is twofold. First, direct victims are not the only targets. Repression communicates a credible threat to wider communities. Second, coercion by proxy transforms family vulnerability into a transnational enforcement lever. This mechanism fits the model precisely because it links macro security discourse to micro speech adaptation through meso channels and observed punishments. Where families remain reachable, deterrence gains force even when host-state legal protection is strong.²⁷⁶

Recent host-state investigations reinforce the credibility dimension. Reports in the UK and Canada frame PRC interference and transnational policing concerns as concrete policy and security issues rather than speculative allegations. Once such findings enter public institutions,

²⁷⁴ Mitzen, 'Ontological Security', pp. 344-350.

²⁷⁵ Freedom House, *China: Transnational Repression* (Washington, DC, 2021), pp. 1-3; Freedom House, *Still Not Safe: Transnational Repression in 2023* (Washington, DC, 2024), p. 6.

²⁷⁶ Freedom House, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach* (Washington, DC, 2021), pp. 18-24.

diaspora actors update risk perceptions even if they have never experienced direct contact themselves. Deterrence, therefore, scales through information diffusion.²⁷⁷

A mechanism test asks whether behaviour changed after threat signals. Evidence from incident reports and community testimonies indicates recurrent post-incident effects: activists reduce visibility, shift to coded communication, avoid public events, or suspend organising. This sequence strongly supports the theorised pathway from coercive signal to anticipatory self-censorship. Rival accounts based only on ordinary migrant conservatism cannot easily explain abrupt behaviour shifts after high-profile intimidation incidents.

The smoking-gun test can therefore specify a stringent standard: a documented chain in which a diaspora critic receives pressure linked to PRC interests, family members in China experience official questioning or threats, and the critic then alters speech or activism. Cases meeting this standard are unlikely under benign diaspora engagement models. They also exceed what generic social media harassment explanations can account for, because the family-based coercion vector depends on the state's reach inside China.²⁷⁸

Subcase B: disciplining students in liberal universities

The student domain is analytically decisive because it sits inside institutions that formally protect debate. If the theory holds, there should still be constrained expression among Chinese and China-linked students in liberal campuses. Recent evidence confirms this pattern. Freedom House's campus-focused documentation records a substantial number of incidents across democracies and shows a mix of on-campus and online tactics. A significant share centres on politically sensitive themes such as Hong Kong, Tibet (Xizang), Xinjiang, and Tiananmen.²⁷⁹

Amnesty's campus research adds micro-level behavioural evidence: many students report fear of monitoring, concern for relatives, and explicit self-censorship in classrooms or events. Importantly, this fear affects not only outspoken dissidents. It shapes ordinary participation

²⁷⁷ Commission of Inquiry into Foreign Interference (Canada), *Final Report*, vol. 1, p. 139; ISC (UK), *China*, p. 193.

²⁷⁸ Freedom House, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach*, pp. 22-30.

²⁷⁹ Freedom House, *Defending Democracy in Exile: Policy and Patterns of Transnational Repression on Campus* (2024), p. 29.

decisions among students who wish to avoid uncertainty and reputational exposure. That is a direct ontological security channel: actors narrow public selves to restore daily predictability.²⁸⁰

Institutionally, student associations and informal peer networks can function as meso transmitters. Some associations operate as routine social support groups. Others become political gatekeepers during controversies. The distinction is not binary. The same organisation can switch roles depending on issue salience and consular proximity. The framework, therefore, analyses role activation rather than a fixed organisational type.

Process tracing in this subcase should test the sequence with precision. The expected order is: a sensitive event appears, organisational brokers frame participation costs, online monitoring intensifies, then students withdraw or sanitise speech. If this sequence recurs across campuses and countries, the mechanism gains external validity. It also counters the claim that incidents are purely local conflicts unrelated to transnational governance.

The subcase also clarifies scope conditions. Not all Chinese students experience equal vulnerability. Risk rises when students rely on mainland-linked digital ecosystems, maintain close family dependence in China, hold legal statuses sensitive to political scrutiny, or occupy visible leadership roles. Variation across these conditions explains why some actors speak openly while others remain silent under similar formal protections. This heterogeneity strengthens rather than weakens the theory because the model predicts conditional activation, not universal compliance.

Subcase C: narrative control in platform ecologies and infrastructural enclosure

The third subcase demonstrates how Digital *Tianxia* operates through infrastructure. WeChat-centred communication ecosystems shape information intake, social ranking, and mobilisation among diaspora users. Platform dependence matters because it fuses communication convenience with governance vulnerability. Users do not merely consume content on a neutral medium. They inhabit an environment where moderation rules, visibility controls, and social ties interact.

²⁸⁰ Amnesty International, *On My Campus, I Am Afraid: China's Targeting of Overseas Students Stifles Rights* (2024), pp. 4-8.

Digital sovereignty scholarship helps conceptualise this layer. Control over infrastructure, data flows, and standards enables political authority to operate without territorial presence. In the diaspora context, this means platform architecture can carry regulatory effects across borders and into everyday social life.²⁸¹

Empirical research supports this mechanism. Technical studies show that WeChat monitors and classifies content in ways that can extend beyond mainland territorial use. One major finding is that content shared by non-mainland users can feed censorship training systems. This indicates a feedback loop where diaspora communication contributes to the refinement of censorship capacity itself.²⁸²

Citizen Lab's later research also identifies durable keyword filtering and account-level governance patterns linked to phone-number registration and politically sensitive content. The implication is direct. Residence outside China does not automatically remove users from politically structured moderation risk. This condition encourages anticipatory adaptation. Users avoid sensitive terms, circulate neutralised summaries, or shift contentious discussion away from visible channels into fragmented private spaces.²⁸³

Sun and Yu's analysis of WeChat in diaspora settings further shows how platform life blends belonging and boundary enforcement. Communities gain cultural continuity and rapid social coordination. At the same time, platform norms can penalise disagreement on high-salience political topics. This duality is central to the main argument. Infrastructural enclosure does not require universal censorship of all content. It requires selective control that makes uncertainty costly for users who value social embeddedness.²⁸⁴

For the process-tracing logic, the observable implications are clear: heavy reliance on platform groups for daily coordination, low diversity of politically sensitive debate, recurrent use of

²⁸¹ Mauro Santaniello, 'Attributes of Digital Sovereignty: A Conceptual Framework', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* (2024), pp. 2-4.

²⁸² Yanhao Wang et al., 'How China Detects and Blocks Sensitive Images on WeChat', *USENIX Security Symposium* (2023), pp. 2, 6-8.

²⁸³ Citizen Lab, 'Frictionless Censorship: How WeChat Censors Chinese Users in Chats' (2023), sections on keyword filtering and account governance (web report).

²⁸⁴ Wanning Sun and Haiqing Yu, *WeChat and the Chinese Diaspora: Digital Transnationalism in the Era of China's Rise* (London: Routledge, 2024), pp. 3-5, 67-71.

euphemism or coded language, and post-incident tightening of group norms after geopolitical flashpoints. If these patterns co-occur with known repression signals, then Mechanism 2 and Mechanism 3 interact as the model predicts.

5. Causal synthesis: hoop tests, smoking gun, and mechanism interaction

Hoop test 1: macro framing precedes institutional expansion.

Party securitising discourse and strategic prioritisation of United Front work appear before and alongside major institutional consolidation of overseas Chinese affairs. This satisfies the first necessary condition for the model.²⁸⁵

Hoop test 2: institutional penetration precedes micro adaptation.

Across the critic, student, and platform-ecology cases, the evidence shows that brokers and organisations transmitted political expectations before most individuals altered their speech behaviour. This temporal sequence supports the meso-transmission mechanism.

Hoop test 3: credible coercion precedes broad self-censorship.

Transnational repression reports and campus testimony show that fear rises with visible incidents, family pressure, or publicised investigations. This supports the deterrence step.²⁸⁶ The smoking-gun standard is strongest where three conditions coincide: extraterritorial legal-ideological claims, institutional brokerage in the host society, and observed behavioural contraction after coercive signals. Cases that include family-based coercion by authorities in China are especially probative because rival explanations cannot easily produce that pattern.

Mechanism interaction also matters. Jurisdictional recoding expands the set of people who can feel politically addressed. Infrastructural enclosure increases visibility and norm enforcement. Coercive deterrence raises the expected cost of noncompliance. Together, these mechanisms create a governance field in which public dissent declines without requiring universal overt repression. This interaction explains why outcome measures should include subtle indicators like topic avoidance and coded communication, not only arrests or prosecutions.

²⁸⁵ USCC, *China's Overseas United Front Work*, pp. 3-6; CPC Central Committee Reform Plan (2018), arts. 34-38.

²⁸⁶ Freedom House, *China: Transnational Repression*, pp. 1-3; Freedom House, *Still Not Safe*, p. 6; Amnesty International, *On My Campus, I Am Afraid*, pp. 4-8.

Rival explanations, limits, and theoretical contributions

One rival attributes silence to ordinary migrant assimilation pressures and language barriers. This explains some political withdrawal but not targeted suppression around PRC-sensitive topics, family-linked intimidation, or coordinated narrative convergence after specific geopolitical events.

A second rival points to generalised anti-Asian racism in host states. This factor can indeed discourage participation and should remain in scope as a background condition. Yet it cannot explain why self-censorship intensifies around PRC red lines, why pressure often references relatives in China, or why behaviour changes follow transnational repression incidents rather than generic discrimination events.

A third rival treats outcomes as a platform capitalism effect with no state specificity. Algorithmic filtering and echo chambers do shape discourse globally. However, evidence on politically sensitive moderation patterns, account governance tied to registration status, and transnational coercive linkage indicates state-connected mechanisms beyond generic platform dynamics.²⁸⁷

The contribution of Digital *Tianxia* is therefore not a claim that every diaspora actor is controlled. The contribution is causal integration. The model explains how a party-state can convert symbolic co-ethnicity into behavioural constraints across borders by combining security discourse, institutional brokerage, platform governance, and coercive signalling. It also explains variation by specifying who is most vulnerable: actors embedded in PRC-linked digital infrastructures, dense community sanction networks, and family geographies exposed to state pressure. It adds a mechanism-level account to debates on digital authoritarianism by linking code, community, and coercion in one causal chain.

At the empirical level, the model predicts measurable outcomes that the data strategy can capture: reduced issue diversity in diaspora forums, lower participation in public dissent events after repression signals, higher use of coded speech in high-risk groups, and persistent asymmetry between private concern and public expression. If process tracing confirms this

²⁸⁷ Wang et al., *USENIX Security* (2023), pp. 2, 6-8; Citizen Lab, ‘Frictionless Censorship’ (2023), relevant sections.

pattern across the three subcases, the theory can claim strong explanatory leverage over the core puzzle of extraterritorial compliance under formal liberal citizenship.

6. Conclusion

This paper set out to explain a central puzzle in contemporary international politics. Why do many members of the Chinese diaspora in liberal democracies moderate speech and political action as if they remain answerable to the Party Central Committee, even when they hold full legal citizenship in host states? The argument has shown that this pattern is not best understood as ordinary migrant conservatism, cultural deference, or generic social media pressure. It is better explained by a structured mode of extraterritorial governance that this paper theorises as *Digital Tianxia*.

The core claim has been causal and mechanism-based. The Party-state first reframes diaspora politics as a security domain. It then institutionalises this security logic through United Front-centred brokerage networks. It finally reproduces compliance through platform-conditioned visibility and coercive deterrence, including pressure that can travel through family ties in China. This sequence links macro strategy to meso transmission and then to micro adaptation. The resulting outcome is not universal ideological conversion. It is a patterned behavioural constraint that appears as self-censorship, political withdrawal, and reduced identity pluralism in liberal contexts.

The empirical subcases support this sequence. The repression of critics demonstrates how deterrence scales beyond direct victims by producing credible fear in wider communities. The student subcase shows that even in institutions committed to open debate, organisational brokerage and risk perception can narrow speech and participation. The platform subcase shows how infrastructural enclosure shapes routine communication so that users anticipate sanctions and adjust expression before overt punishment occurs. Together, these domains reveal mechanism interaction rather than isolated incidents.

The theoretical contribution is fourfold. First, the paper extends securitisation theory by showing how security framing can authorise governance beyond territorial jurisdiction. Second, it extends ontological security scholarship by showing how repeated risk signals and community sanctions stabilise silence as a routine practice. Third, it refines diaspora governance theory by identifying the conditions under which engagement institutions become disciplinary channels. Fourth, it advances work on digital authoritarianism by integrating institutions, infrastructures, and coercion in one explanatory chain. In this sense, *Digital Tianxia* is not a metaphor. It is a testable model of transnational political control.

The analysis also clarifies what the argument does not claim. It does not claim that all overseas Chinese associations are Party-directed. It does not claim uniform compliance across all diaspora populations. It does not deny host-state racism or broader platform capitalism as relevant background forces. Instead, it shows that these factors cannot, on their own, explain the observed timing, targeting, and cross-case recurrence of behaviour change around politically sensitive issues linked to the PRC.

The policy implication is clear. Liberal democracies must move beyond a narrow focus on episodic interference scandals and treat transnational repression and infrastructural dependency as connected governance problems. Effective responses should protect civil liberties while reducing coercive reach. This requires stronger protection for threatened communities, better reporting and policing pathways for transnational intimidation, transparent oversight of campus and community brokerage structures, and greater scrutiny of platform environments that concentrate political communication in high-risk ecosystems. The objective is not to securitise diaspora communities themselves. The objective is to secure their democratic rights in practice.

Future research should build comparative leverage across origin states and platform systems. It should also develop finer measures of behavioural contraction, including longitudinal evidence on speech routines, organisational participation, and identity claims over time. This paper has established the mechanism architecture and demonstrated its empirical plausibility. The broader stakes are profound. As digital infrastructures reorder political space, the boundary between domestic citizenship and external authoritarian reach becomes more fragile. Understanding that shift is now essential for both international relations theory and democratic governance.

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CRITICAL ESSAYS

Meme Wars: Political Meme Culture As Sublimation: How Internet Humor Shapes World Politics

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Introduction

The internet is a reservoir of memes, which can be defined as visuals, aesthetics, behavioural logics and circulations of silly, playful and non-serious artefacts. As Olga Goriunova argues, then, ‘a meme is not only content, but a behaviour, or rather systems of human-technical performances. A meme emerges from multiple sites, agents, and ecologies, which dynamically interlock to form networks that propel its coming into being.’ According to an article published by Marketing LTB, Instagram users share 1 million memes per day (as of 2021). Memes are an essential product and driver of the digital economy, covering a myriad of topics and subjects. Politics has not been isolated from this influential ballgame. In fact, politics is closely intertwined with the construction and consumption of memes. As Jonathan Dean argues, we are currently witnessing a rising ‘memeification of politics’.

What is a Memescape?

The memescape, as defined by Uygur Basphehivan, is the relational space of pop-cultural production, circulation, and consumption of textual, visual, and audial artefacts called memes that traverse online and offline media through a process of mutative imitation and collective production. Memes are primarily (but not necessarily) humorous artefacts and often involve a shared sensibility of non-seriousness and playfulness through which everyday social and political conditions and situations can be mocked, criticised, and/or subverted. As highly mutative and viral products, they are not contained by singular platforms but rather circulate various digital and non-digital spaces through practices such as remixing, sampling, collaging, and reposting in continuous variation. It is a continual relationship with the spatial arrangement of the international.

Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualisation of the spatial ontology of smooth and striated spaces

Striated spaces are spatial configurations defined by a relation of hierarchical, segmented organisation based on a central overarching logic governing and delimiting the movements, potentialities and identities of elements positioned within their structures. Striated spaces are those which produce particular, limited movements between bodies. The international, as a political regime, can be conceptualised as a striated space. Smooth spaces tend towards non-hierarchical, non-determined, and multiple interrelations between various political, cultural, and social elements. Such spaces potentialise new and unexpected movements, creative associations and transformative connections across their contours. Three interrelated logics of spatial relation define the configuration of smooth spaces - rhizomaticity, nomadicity and multiplicity. A *rhizomatic* configuration, in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, designates relations between elements that are not organised through the hierarchical lens of a structuring centre but those which emerge through decentralised, horizontal, and processual relations in reciprocal and differential determination. That is, a rhizomatic configuration is decentralised and reciprocally constitutive. *Nomadic* configuration, on the other hand, refers to the continuous and varying mobility of elements that escape fixity. A nomadic relation, whether between subjects, objects, signs, or affects, is always in movement: 'in continuous variation'. Finally, a *multiple* relation implies that a smooth spatial configuration gives way to relations between a heterogeneous ensemble of elements that cannot be reduced to an overarching, singular mode of identification but only relate in and through differences together.

Memes as Sublimation

Freud's concept of sublimation refers to the transformation of socially unacceptable impulses like aggression, desire and frustration into socially valued forms such as art, literature and humour. Political memes fit really well in this framework. In crisis-specific situations, citizens experience helplessness and a loss of power. They cannot directly influence larger forces and phenomena like wars, elections or diplomatic decisions. Yet memes allow them the autonomy to transform

this feeling of helplessness into symbolic agency. For example, during military conflict, public anger is redirected into satirical memes. This makes memes act like a mass psychological coping mechanism. This is especially evident in the Israel-Gaza war, where meme pages rapidly circulate emotional responses through irony and satire.

Memes and Collective Identity

Henri Tajfel and John Turner's Social Identity Theory can also be assimilated here to understand what makes memes so powerful. SIT posits that a person's self-concept is largely defined by their membership in social groups. People categorise themselves and others into "in-groups" (us) and "out-groups" (them) to create positive distinctiveness, favouring their own group to boost self-esteem. Core Components of SIT According to Tajfel and Turner, social identity is built through three key mental processes:

Social Categorisation: Individuals classify people (including themselves) into social groups (e.g., nationality, sports team, profession) to understand the social environment. **Social Identification:** Individuals adopt the identity, norms, attitudes, and behaviors of the group they have categorized themselves into. **Social Comparison:** Individuals compare their in-group with relevant out-groups to enhance self-esteem, typically perceiving their own group as superior. When a community shares a political meme, it makes the social cohesion robust. Thus, shared humor becomes a mode of defining shared identity. This is portrayed in nationalist meme culture, feminist meme groups on reddit and protest movements. For example, during Indian-Pakistan tensions, memes often reinforce national identity through the process of categorization and othering. This aligns with Baspehlivan's argument that meme spaces create affective multiplicities, bringing together disconnected parts through emotional resonance.

Jung, Archetypes and Myth- making

Carl Jung's theory of archetypes and collective conscious provides another layer to this already complex tiramisu. Complex geopolitical issues are often reduced in nature by political memes into archetypal symbolic roles like the victim, the clown, the oppressor, the rebel, and the savior.

Political leaders' caricatures are made and they are memefied as tyrants or fools. Archetypes help societies in processing reality through familiar mythic structures.

Resistance Memes

Indigenous communities use memes as tools to challenge the narratives surrounding the settler-colonial debates. A remarkable example is the meme “Illegal Immigrants Go Back Home”, which flips the nationalist rhetoric by questioning the settler’s claims to legitimacy. This meme uproots conventional assumptions about belonging, sovereignty and legality. It is a deeply subversive process.

Conclusion

Political memes have increasingly made a space in the geopolitical landscape as instruments of soft power. They can shape international perception faster than diplomatic declarations. This changes narratives and public sentiments. When visual information has all of us in a chokehold, a key question that emerges is who decides the boundary between humor and harm? Memes are not neutral entities, they are meaning carriers and narrative makers that are shaped by who creates them, who circulates them and who consumes them. In totality, memes are not just peripheral to politics, they are politics. They are the most potent symbol of our digital political consciousness. The future of political discourse is not restricted to parliaments or documents - it may be embedded in a meme that will travel with intensity, volatility and speed. In such a world, its even more imperative to have legal systems in place to safeguard against the harms of the memespace.

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The Discord Between Institutional Silence And Deafening Cyberspaces: The Role Of Social Media In The Nepal Gen Z Revolution

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Introduction

A way to wade through the complexity of the world order can be by narrowing it to a binary; stillness and sublimation.

Stillness is the representation of the decay that our institutions have morphed into. A plethora of promises that remain unfulfilled and an indifferent state that treats its people with apathy. With unemployment rates through the roof, rising dissatisfaction among the people, and political order in chaos, the people may look to their sacrosanct leaders and find the most telling symptom of rot: silence.

Sublimation, on the other hand, is the cleansing of decay. It is accompanied by a cacophony of deafening noise. States witness sublimatory experiences when they undergo a revolution, a civil war, or any such event that indicates a response to the silence. One such sublimatory experience can be a mass shift to form smaller, decentralised communities that lead to revolution.

It is in this dissonance between rigid silence and cataclysmic uproar, that cyberspaces come to life.

In his work *Neotribalism*, Maffesoli states that postmodern societies are moving away from the mechanical nature of institutional collectives and seem to be moving toward affective, fluid "tribes." These tribes are held together by shared emotions rather than just ideologies. The core of each tribe is a mutual feeling of community. In the case of Nepal, this would be an *internet* community.

What Constant Silence Communicates?

If we are to follow the traditional media coverage of this revolution, its beginning can be pinpointed to the outright ban on 26 social media platforms in September 2025, which can be taken to be the formal start of a sublimatory experience.

However, on further elaboration, one finds that the context in which the ban took place holds greater importance than the ban itself.

The context of this ban, i.e., the rising rate of corruption and unemployment, the domino effect under which prime ministers ruled (Nepal had 13 governments in 16 years) (¹Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025) and the #NepoBaby trend, which showcased the lavish lifestyles of many politicians' children surrounded by luxury and material comfort, when juxtaposed with the life of the ordinary Nepali citizen can be paralleled to stillness, since everything that was brimming underneath the inaction of the government led to the ultimate demise of the former government.

Castells, in his theory *Network Society*, states that power operates through the capacity to *programme* networks, i.e., society. One can draw a parallel to traditional institutions and claim that although they did obtain this power, due to the emergence of decentralised communities as a result of consistent apathy, they are no longer the vanguards of political discourse.

One does note that the institutional stillness and silence were on some level weaponised by the government when the response to growing exposition by the #NepoBaby trend was to shut down these decentralised communities and social media platforms where voices could most likely exist.

Thus, the stillness in institutions is not conducive to the youth and shows that institutional failures are communicated through continuous silence.

Decentralised Communities

The fact that the #NepoBaby trend started in Indonesia, migrated to Philippines, Bangladesh and Nepal depicts just how livewired the nature of political discourse can be, and how the creation of these communities present a symbiotic fusion of many differing ideas and opinions that affect democratic participation.

One may be able to argue that the internet and its small sub-communities on Discord and TikTok (which later grew to 160,000 members) (²Kathmandu Post, 2025), successfully acted as a deliberative forum which the nation's Parliament itself was not able to achieve. Perhaps, the architecture of these decentralised communities that are so far away from our conventional and clogged establishments make it easier for the youth, and particularly Gen Z, to participate in.

One can make use of Maffesoli's Neotribalism theory to frame the Discord Server ("Youth Against Corruption") as a 'tribe' that was not built on any ethnic or ideological basis but an empathetic commitment and shared hopes for the future of the Republic of Nepal. These tribes even build solidarity through the use of aesthetics like memes, stickers, and music. Moreover, there was no contractual obligation involved in the tribe and the participation was flexible, interchangeable, and emotionally charged with no single leader, and was dissolved once the immediate objective was achieved.

E-Governance: Literally And Metaphorically

These decentralised communities do not merely represent public discontent but also serve as tools for positive social change by actively generating administrative accountability and democratic participation. Throughout the entire protest, the role that social media played was arguably the most integral as it quite literally replicated the democratic process. In the discord poll that took place on 10 September 2025 at approximately 10 pm that was livestreamed on YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook, around 7,586 young Nepalis cast their votes for Sushila Karki to take on the position of interim head (³TechPolicy.Press, 2025). This was not the only channel that fed into the final decision, but rather, an additive to army negotiations and constitutional processes, which led to the President having to invoke the "doctrine of necessity" to appoint Karki.

The Case Of Nepal

The disproportionate response of the state to the protests on 8 September 2025 communicated to the public a fundamental truth: that the government of Nepal was not accepting of sublimatory experiences and that its refusal to adapt would be expressed by brutality and force.

The gathering at Maitighar Mandala at 9 am was led by young protestors in school and college uniforms to express a certain level of vulnerability and implied that the protest was mostly expected to remain peaceful. However, some 14,182 instances of firing that took place across the country over two days confirmed a desire to systematically suppress. (⁴Kathmandu Post, 2025)

Vasylchyshyn et al. (2024) argue that social media has fundamentally transformed the relationship between state violence and public legitimacy, such that, footage of the protest crackdown turned viral and received responses from global bodies such as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights(⁵OHCHR, 2025), i.e., the state's monopoly on the narrative of the protest seemed to collapse into itself, which fueled the consequences in the coming days. (⁶Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2025)

The incredibly short time span between the ban (4 September) and the resignation of Prime Minister KP Oli (9 September) showed that there was no space for a slow negotiation or reformation phase and like the platform the revolution started on, this transformation was quick and abrupt. **Samal & Katela's** (2024) argument in "Social Media as a New Public Administration Instrument" states that social media is not merely a communication tool but a *governance supplement* that fills administrative gaps. This theory is directly applied to this situation. Due to the laws of the 2015 constitution, Sushila Karki could not become prime minister as a former chief justice and as a non-parliamentarian, but this change was later accommodated by the invocation of "the doctrine of necessity" by the President, Ram Chandra Poudel, himself (¹Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025). The constitutional framework had to be bent to accommodate the speed of the transition.

What are these government supplements that the decentralised community offers?

The discord server here not only served as a virtual assembly protest, it allowed open debate and discussion and was even termed as "the Parliament of Nepal." The candidates were narrowed to five names for interim head, they were a social activist and mayor, a social entrepreneur, an independent youth leader, a YouTube personality, and former Chief Justice Sushila Karki. An open Discord poll drew a collective of 50% votes in Sushila Karki's favour. This forum generated a legitimacy pressure that shaped the oncoming government and future of the Republic of Nepal.

Hence these government supplements are: deliberation, candidate vetting, voting, and legitimacy generation. This represents the most radical implication of social media as a public administration instrument.

Soon after the objective of the discord server was achieved, it was dissolved. This displays yet another important aspect of Maffesoli's Neotribalism theory that digital neotribes are temporary in nature.

The Age Of Neotocracy

Neotocracy can be defined as governance in which legitimacy is derived from digitally organised communities rather than inherited institutional authority. This forms the crux of this entire essay: that conditions under which any institution fails to speak can be sublimated by communities that are deafening in their stature.

This is not a prediction of the end of the formal authority a state holds but this case does serve as a new structural condition in which the state, by not choosing to speak, risks a response that will be harsh, quick, and generated elsewhere and the ripple effect of which, will be felt by the state. This is what the Nieman Reports called "a Rubicon" (Nieman Reports, 2025), that political leaders are confronted with online mobilisation in the face of their inaction.

If Stillness is a build-up, Sublimation is its equal and opposite reaction of erosion, then neotocracy is the aftermath of an unprecedented revolution.

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Who Shouldn't Get What, When, and Why Not?

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Introduction

Pressure continues to reside on the opening line of an essay, expecting to capture the attention of the reader with an engaging hook. In contrast to rules and consistency, politics proceeds to acquire new dimensions to deliberate upon. The international arena has witnessed an expansion of contentious issues beyond national boundaries. This transformation demands a fundamental rethinking of the dimensions within which politics operates. Harold Lasswell, in his seminal work "Who Gets What, When, How" (1936), associated politics with the distribution of resources.

The battle for control over global commons denotes a key shift in the template of war in the 21st century. Who gets to 'claim legitimacy' over the resources that lie beyond national jurisdiction? How does realism continue to maintain its relevance in this seemingly diplomatic, cordial world that respects sovereignty? The persistence of asymmetries between the Global North and Global South embodies the history of development made on the back of political exploitation. Since disruptions today are not confined to state-centric issues, this essay examines the evolution of conflicts into battles of narrative, institutions, and access.

Theoretical Framework

Global commons are international and supranational resource domains, ideally governed through principles of collective sustainability. In practice, however, they remain vulnerable to exploitation by the powerful nation-states. 19th-century economist William Forster Lloyd talked about unregulated grazing on common land; inspired by him, ecologist Garrett Hardin popularised the concept of the "Tragedy of the Commons" in 1968. It is an economic theory in which the overexploitation of a shared resource renders it unfit for everyone's consumption, leading to collective degradation.

Lasswell's conception of politics can be applied to the global commons. Ultimately, global commons can be interpreted as a new arena of "who gets what". These new facets employ Steven Lukes' '3 Dimensions of Power', as he mentioned in "Power: A Radical View". The brute strength of military and naval forces embodies direct domination, while control over space and maritime law corresponds with agenda-setting power. Historical claims, meanwhile, capture perfectly the essence of shaping narratives to perpetuate perceptions. This realisation substantiates that power continues to exist in classic hard, soft, and structural forms, albeit in different shapes; it remains the foundation for the realist agendas.

The complexity of these interactions is presented by Hannah Arendt, who provided a sharp distinction between power and violence. She stated, "Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent." In this age of technology, cyberspace is often cited as a "5th", emerging global common; hence, states wage a war on the digital frontier (cyberattacks). As Michael Zürn contended famously, global governance is no longer consensual; it is marked by contested norms and fragmented authority. This fragmentation lets states override regulatory frameworks without taking accountability.

Case-Based Analysis

Maritime Flashpoints

About 80 to 90 per cent of the global trade, by volume, takes place through sea routes. The ongoing conflict in West Asia, with the closure of the Hormuz Strait, has massively affected oil and gas prices throughout the world. Another such contested region for a long time has been the South China Sea. Resources worth an estimated \$3.4 trillion, over 21% of global trade, are carried through its shipping lanes every year, including oil & gas reserves.

The major player in the region remains China, claiming nearly 90% of the sea using the 'nine-dash line', a claim which has been deemed baseless by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (2016). Other claimants include the Philippines, which utilises its proximity to the Spratly Islands and the Scarborough Shoal to assert their right over the region. Vietnam, meanwhile, argues that it has documents to prove its authority over numerous islands of the South China Sea, and contends that China was never interested in the region until the 1940s.

This dynamic reflects Lasswell's conception of resource distribution. Additionally, China's claims involving an arbitrary ancient map with no legal basis substantiates the importance of narratives in shaping legitimate perceptions, as described by Steven Lukes as the 3rd dimension of power.

Outer Space

States might argue that the ruthless arena of international relations compels them to capitalise on the 'grey zones'. One such domain, which blurs the boundaries of sovereignty, lies far out of the reach of any nation: outer space. Who makes the law in space? The technological powerhouses of Russia, the USA, and China all advance different rationales behind their claims over the ever-expanding region. The aspect of agenda-setting to make favourable laws propounded by Lukes best explains the logic behind their arguments.

It is no secret that Russia and the USA have pioneered space exploration through their well-endowed research programmes and scientific machinery. The Cold War rivals claim what Zürn has called "first-mover's advantage" in contested governance. They emphasise their technological advantage to justify their endeavours in space research and maintain that all of humankind benefits from the observations that only their advanced satellites can extract.

Their position, however, is a display of self-interest rather than collective benefit. Russia and the USA derive significant economic, technological, and geopolitical benefits from space research. They generate commercial satellite revenue, military intel, investments from other countries, and billions in economic impact (NASA boosted the American economy by \$75.6 billion by supporting over 3 lakh jobs in FY23).

Polar Politics

The Antarctic Treaty System (ATS), established in 1959, represents a rare example of shared governance based on consensus amongst countries. ATS works as a moral framework, aimed at encouraging scientific cooperation in the Antarctic Circle. However, the normative nature of the treaty is precisely why the coldest continent has increasingly become subject to controversy. Several problems plague the effectiveness of the ATS: most notably, the absence of a central authority. The ATS relies on nations to implement norms independently; so, while activities like

commercial mining are prohibited, the risk of powerful nations overriding protection norms is always looming around the corner.

Even the conception of legitimacy formulated by Hannah Arendt, that legitimacy is derived from consent and participation of citizens, fails to resolve disputes over territorial ambitions in Antarctica because of the lack of a permanent population. Hence, while the ATS continues to mobilise cooperation grounded in restraint, its moral nature makes it susceptible to arbitrary reinterpretation by powerful actors.

Cyber Warfare

The entities of dispute so far all have a physical presence, but what happens when the battlefield turns invisible? The intangible nature of cyberspace makes it the hardest to regulate via norms. Consequently, states employ cyberattacks as a means to sabotage the information systems of their rivals. Even in its digital form, violence invades the principle of sovereignty. In the words of Arendt, “The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world.” Cyber warfare reflects not only coercion but also the invisible shaping of information environments, aligning closely with Lukes’ third dimension of power.

Critical Reflections

Are Contemporary Conflicts Truly ‘New’?

While recent developments appear original as the domains of conflict have expanded, the binding factor remains the same: power. This challenges the assumption that modern politics is a complete departure from classical IR theories. Contemporary international relations continue to be driven by realism; the underlying logic of power competition remains unchanged. This suggests a deeper realisation: control over information channels now carries unprecedented significance in shaping perceptions and agendas that support national aspirations.

Is Global Governance Failing or Being Rewritten?

The current dynamic of transnational relations relies heavily on the assumption that states will respect the norms set, giving rise to the perennial risk of unilateral overreach by stronger nations.

However, rather than indicating collapse, this reflects what Zürn identifies as fragmentation within global governance structures. The liberal principles of the 21st century value mutual benefit, but they also recognise that the biggest driving force for every nation is securing national interest. Information asymmetries and narrative control have affected global systems, such as the ATS, space law, and cyber norms; contemporary governance is no longer unified; it is contested and politicised.

Conclusion

Contemporary geopolitical disruptions have expanded into new and increasingly complex domains. The contestation over global commons demonstrates that power, in its various forms, is still relevant to the political aspirations of countries. By combining centuries of theoretical knowledge and lived experiences, states navigate these domains through coercive diplomacy, negotiation, and structural mechanisms.

At the same time, the institutions responsible for governing these spaces reveal a shift towards fragmentation. The acceptance of norms and regulations is no longer universalistic; instead, nations selectively interpret them to maximise strategic advantage. The nationalist policies of states arrive on the global stage with the sole desire of serving their interest, naturally leading to compromise and dissatisfaction. This adds to the growing complexity of global governance in the 21st century. Ultimately, the question is no longer who controls territory; statal ambitions now include control over access, information, legitimacy, and authority across shared domains.

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BOOK REVIEW

The Evolution of Garbage-Can Diplomacy: A Review of *Why Irrational Politics Appeals*

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Introduction

This academic review analyses and expands upon the book edited by Mari Fitzduff, *Why Irrational Politics Appeals: Understanding the Allure of Trump* (2017), by examining how the field of political psychology intersects with the Garbage Can Model of organisational choice. The Garbage Can Model asserts that decisions are made by a random coupling of problems, solutions, and stakeholders. This review frames the irrational politics of President of the United States (POTUS) Donald J. Trump, as discussed in Fitzduff's book, as an expression of a broader phenomenon of "*Garbage Can Diplomacy*". It argues that the radical changes in the global order are a process of **Trump's irrational politics** ("*sublimation*"), characterised by theatrics and drama, which itself is a direct consequence of **institutional inertia** (or "*stillness*") of the multilateral world.

An Outsider Shedding the Old Order

Mari Fitzduff is a professor with experience in peacebuilding, but she goes beyond her discipline in this edited volume to do a post-mortem of the 2016 U.S. election. By uniting the academia and researchers of social psychology, neuroscience, and leadership studies, the book notes the key paradox of how "apparent irrationality became considered by most of the American population as the rational decision" (Fitzduff, 2017, p. 2).

However, the findings of their studies are relevant not just for understanding domestic politics, but for emotions in state behaviour as a whole. It deconstructs "*stillness*" in the global order as a phase of institutional inertia in which the old political machinery has become ineffective in

serving the masses. According to Fitzduff, by 2015, only 19 percent of America's population believed the government to do the right thing, and this is where "permanently unproductive" political systems created a vacuum for leaders like Trump. Trump's profile as a "Washington outsider" who denies the "staleness of contemporary politics" (Popper, 2025) is a solution-cum-problem of institutional stillness. He disrupts this "*stillness*" by not acting through any prevalent linear, rational-actor models of 20th-century diplomacy.

Trump's actions can be understood through what can be called a "*Garbage Can Diplomacy*". Trump engages in such diplomacy in the international arena when he effectively challenges rigid multilateral norms. In his address to the General Assembly on September 23, 2025, he criticized the United Nations' functioning and swiftly transformed the United States' foreign policy into an "America First" approach. Trump took this decision whilst disrupting the need for global unity inside multilateral institutions, which are required to tackle challenges collectively faced by humanity, such as climate change, terrorism and economic inequality.

Understanding the Evolutionary Software

A core finding of the volume is that people's ability to make rational decisions is far shallower than assumed by modern democratic theories. In chapters 4 and 13, Micha Popper and Christopher Reina help the reader understand how human leadership choices are subject to a "software" encoded within human evolution. This software is composed of "*System 1*" and "*System 2*" thinking. *System 1* thinking is automatic, fast, and emotional, while *System 2* thinking is the slow, analytical rationale necessary for making informed choices. Using functional MRI (fMRI) studies, the authors show that our feelings and emotions (*System 1* thinking) often take precedence and dominate over our cognitive processes (*System 2* thinking), especially during stressful moments.

Hence, the allure of Trump is not due to an intellectual failure on the part of "stupid" and "knave" people, but to Trump's success in activating this *System 1* thinking. As Reina (2025) notes, Trump taps into the "fight-or-flight mode" or "ego-based" functions inside his voter. It can be observed in weak psychological situations, populated by crisis and uncertainty, where Popper (2025) observed that American voters would turn to a "Savannah Leader" and opt to vote for candidates who project an appearance of strength, even if it was superficial. When people notice a candidate (Trump) who "throws open a window to let a cool breeze rush through the stagnant

smoke-filled room of [usual] politics” (Fitzduff, 2025, p. 15), they are not interested in the destination (goals) anymore. They just want relief from the stale and usual politics. This can be characterised by how nearly 25 per cent of Trump’s supporters believed he was not qualified to be President but still voted for him to achieve “needed change”.

Trump's activation of this *System 1* thinking is also the foundational basis for *Garbage Can Diplomacy*. He has taken advantage of this software even among agents in the international structure. In trade agreements with the European Union (EU), Canada or Mexico, Trump got economic leverage in the deals by using tariffs. The negotiators were put under a time crunch to close deals due to the massive economic impact of the tariffs on their economies. This activated a “fight-or-flight” mode of *System 1* thinking, even within state behaviour, which ultimately benefited Trump.

Selling Identity and Hope

Trump’s rise to power can be understood in Chapter 2, which argues that he is an “Entrepreneur of Identity”. According to Stephen Reicher and S. Alexander Haslam, Trump has not been successful because of “mindless mobs” but because he enables his followers to make sense of their lived experience. Trump’s rallies, in this context, become an “identity festival” and a theatrical performance of a specific vision of America. Trump couples this by selling a hope of ‘Make America Great Again’!

For constructing the identity, Trump positions himself as a “prototypical” version of the “ordinary American” citizen. He projects himself as a true representative of the American people despite his elite background. Although he is a billionaire, he embraces and symbolises “key values and qualities that distinguish the group (his voters) from others”, including hard work and a “cult of democratic aspiration”. This prototypicality enables him to be perceived as “one of us” while the political establishment (“the enemy within”) is cast as “them”.

This entrepreneurship of identity is also utilised in Trump’s *Garbage Can Diplomacy* for the global order. He redefines state behaviour in terms of a particular identity as opposed to operating solely based on interests. For instance, the United States (US) support of Israel gets more identity-driven by painting Muslims as “outsiders” rather than their original interest-based approach of having Israel as a pro-West state in the Middle East (Haidt, 2012). Fitzduff (2025, p. 8) further insinuates that “the truths espoused at Trump rallies will matter far more to many

Trump supporters than those expounded in newspapers, by other politicians, or by academics”. The same phenomenon gets replicated at the global stage when US allies support Trump’s “truths” about Iran. He replaces the staleness of diplomacy with a fluid, identity-based volatility.

Trump’s Neurobiology of Fear

An important insight into this volatility is covered in the chapters concerned with the neurobiological triggers of political decisions. The Terror Management Theory (TMT) used by Cohen et al. in chapter 9, states that charismatic, strongman leaders are a means of defence against “unconscious death anxiety”. Their study reveals that even subtle hints of mortality like “threaten[ing] [of] the American worldview” through immigration or terrorism can increase the probability levels of voting for a leader like Trump (Cohen et al., 2025, p. 146).

Trump uses “fear appeals” to tap into the amygdala, a part of the brain that generates automatic emotional reactions, to establish the threats to America in a voter’s mind. In chapter 8, Matthew MacWilliams further adds that these threats trigger “authoritarian tendencies” among the citizens. These inclinations, the pursuit of which is marked by the fear of “the other” and willingness to follow dominant leaders, are not in-built features but get “activated when people’s social or economic context becomes threatening” (Fitzduff, 2025, p. 11).

“Threat” is the strongest, most potent actor of Garbage Can Diplomacy. Trump creates a radical change by constructing his persona as the only “qualified” leader who can deal with these “amygdala fears”. As seen earlier, voters chose him despite knowing he is not really qualified. This shows the *sublimation* of reason (*System 2* thinking) as the voter accepts a “negative yet certain outcome” over a “potentially more positive, yet uncertain one” because the nuances or details of such critical thinking create anxiety.

A Mechanics of Disruption

This raises an important question of how Trump creates the perception that he is a “qualified” or “certain outcome”? The psychological explanation of his diplomatic style is presented in chapter 10 by Karina Korostelina’s work on the subject of “Insulter Trump”. According to her, his use of insults enables his supporters to “achieve high self-esteem and increase their perception of power”. Her phrase of “increase their perception” implies that Trump is not building such a perception from scratch. A superiority complex pre-exists in certain sections of the American

populace, and Trump merely leverages that. He “punch[es] political correctness in the face” with his insults and offers a safe space for his followers to be able to do the same. Unlike earlier, they need not feel curtailed by regulations on their freedoms and can actively challenge social and political norms.

Furthermore, in chapter 12, Chou and Ondaatje argue the “Dramatic Rationalities” of Trump as he has made entertainment as a political mode of engagement. His campaign was not a set of policy debates but a “melodrama”, which provided a “vision of a black-and-white universe”. This theatre of elections is another major component for Garbage-Can Diplomacy as it makes sure that the “participants” or stakeholders are kept in a state of high emotional intensity or arousal, so that they are prevented from reverting to any *System 2-like* institutional stillness.

An Overall Critical Analysis of the Book

Fitzduff’s volume succeeds mainly due to its interdisciplinary synthesis. It transcends the reductionist label of irrationality of political opinions by integrating neuroscience to political sociology. This aids in identifying the logic behind the feelings of Trump’s supporters. It attempts to frame the Trump phenomenon not as a historical accident but as a predictable outcome of the “collective failure” of the world to address the “lived experience” of a section of society. However, the book’s heavy domestic focus is an omission of intricate analysis that could have been potentially done for the international stage. While it gives one an in-depth examination of the American psyche, it does not sufficiently analyse the impact of these “irrational” domestic decisions for the state’s behaviour in the international arena.

It leaves a lasting impression on a reader as it is a fundamental text for studying how domestic agency dominates through emotions in the state structure and its behaviour. It shows that, at a time when multilateral institutions are in a terminal state of “stillness”, leaders who embrace the theatrics of a *Garbage Can Model* are more likely to find the following. The book highlights how it isn’t solely the process of democratic decay to blame for the transformation of rigid norms into extreme uncertainty, but it is a symptom of a world where “emotional contagion” has begun to dictate state policy.

Conclusion

This edited book by Fitzduff is a must read, as it serves as a wake-up call for everyone that the global order is not solely being run by rational actors. Rather, it is the amygdala's "emotional horse", fuelled by people's death anxiety and identity crises, which increasingly drives state action. A *Garbage Can Diplomacy* offered by Trump is an effective response to institutional inertia, as it is a movement which offers "hope" and demands much-needed change by disrupting the existing rules-based order.

The findings of this book indicate that the phenomenon of *sublimation* will likely continue to describe global politics and international relations until we solve the issue of the *stillness* of our institutions. As the book's authors concluded, we are "strangers to ourselves", and until our evolutionary software is balanced to our modern requirements, the lure of irrational politics will be the most rational choice for those who have been left behind by the present order.

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