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IN A MULTIPOLAR CONTEXT



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Transforming Economies
in a Multipolar Context

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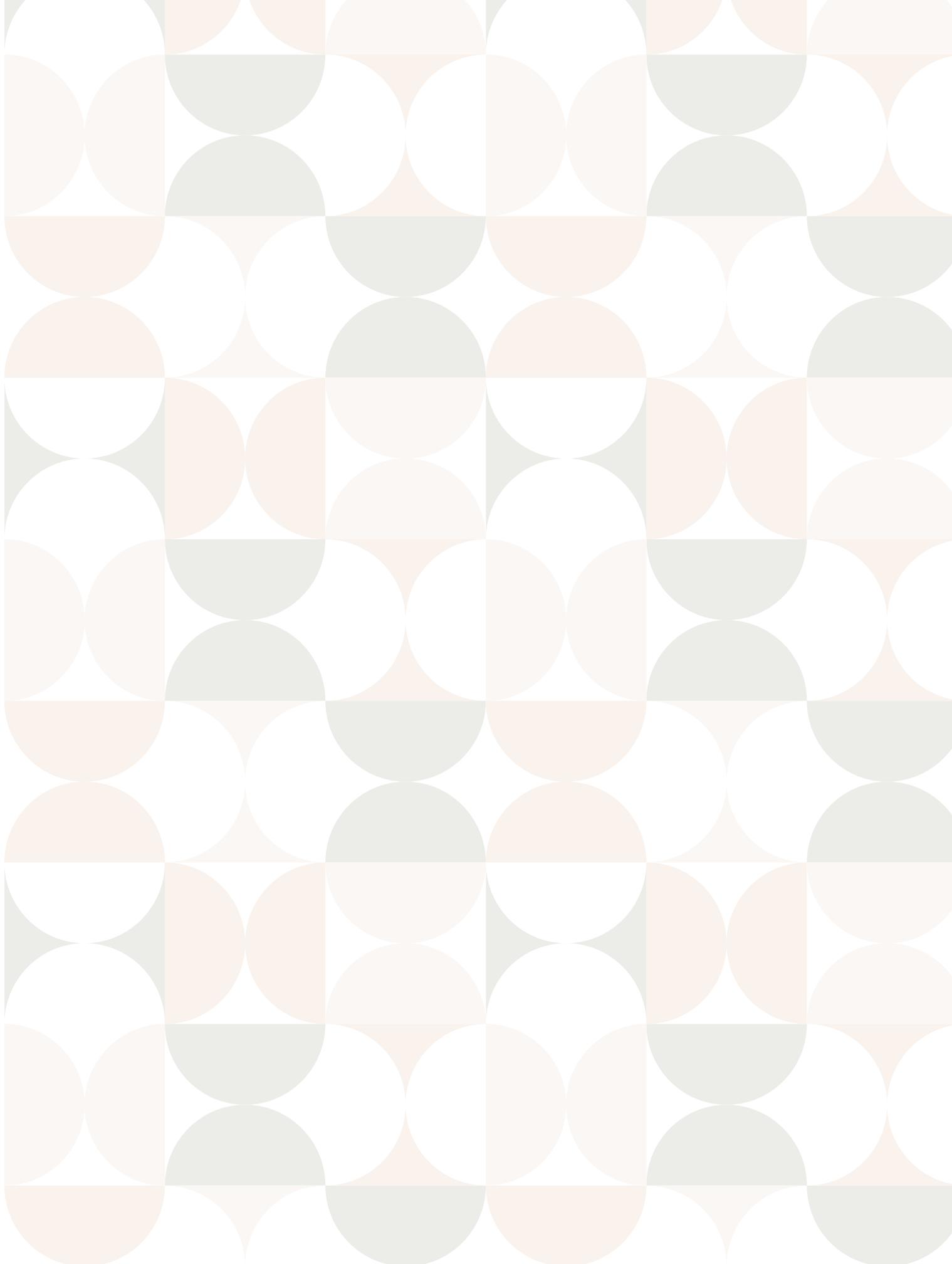
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INTRODUCTION

Editor's Foreword

The fourth issue of *Eurázsia Szemle*, Volume V, appears at a time when the international system is experiencing significant structural change. The topic of this issue – *Transforming Economies in a Multipolar Context* – captures the complex adjustments taking place in global and regional interactions. Across Eurasia, states and societies are responding to new economic, technological, and political realities that are reshaping the region into a more diverse, interconnected, and multicentric space. The studies presented in this volume examine these transformations from diverse disciplinary and regional perspectives, combining empirical research with theoretical reflection on the evolving dynamics of global order.

The issue opens with the North Eurasia column, and begins with the study by Gyöngyvér Hervainé Szabó and Péter Szatmári, titled *Russia's New Foreign Policy: Together with the World's Majority*. This contribution analyses the key directions of Russia's 2023 foreign policy concept, focusing on its declared orientation towards the so-called "World Majority". The authors examine how the concept of "state civilisation" has entered Russian strategic discourse, influencing the country's approach to diplomacy, economic relations and cultural policy. Their analysis considers both the theoretical underpinnings of this framework and its practical implications, particularly in Russia's relations with African and Asian partners, its participation in multilateral formats such as BRICS and the evolving role of the Russian Orthodox Church in foreign engagement. The study provides an in-depth exploration of how narratives of sovereignty, civilisation and identity are being integrated into contemporary Russian policy thinking.

The second paper in this column, by Catherine Enoredia Odorige and Szilvia Kovács, titled *Bilateral Relationships as a Comprehensive Approach to Greening the Future: A Comparative Perspective on China's Energy Sustainability Engagement with Hungary and Nigeria*, explores China's bilateral energy cooperation as a mechanism for sustainable development. Drawing on a comparative analysis of two distinct national contexts, the authors discuss the interdependence between energy policy, economic diversification, and environmental commitments. Their research highlights how China's energy partnerships reflect a dual emphasis on continuity and transition – balancing conventional and renewable energy investments within the Belt and Road framework. The comparison of Hungary and Nigeria illustrates how domestic regulatory capacity and development priorities shape the outcomes of international cooperation in energy transformation.

In the Southeast Asia column, Tuyen Tran's study, *Vietnam Rising in the Multipolar Era: Connecting Asia and Europe through Strategic Positioning, Private Economy, and Proactive Diplomacy*, examines Vietnam's evolving foreign policy and economic strategy as part of its broader integration into global value chains. The paper highlights how Vietnam leverages its geographical position and dynamic private sector to strengthen economic connectivity between Asia and Europe. It demonstrates how small and medium powers can pursue diversified partnerships to enhance resilience and maintain balanced relations amid changing international alignments.

Also in this column, Dean Karalekas's article, *Scylla and Charybdis in the Natuna Sea: All Eyes on the Future Course Set by Prabowo*, analyses Indonesia's maritime security policy and its implications for regional stability. The study situates Indonesia's strategic posture within the evolving security landscape of Southeast Asia and explores how Jakarta navigates external pressures while seeking to protect national and regional interests in an increasingly complex maritime environment.

The South Asia column presents three distinct analyses of the region's evolving security and political environment. Béla Hada's study, *Military Modernisation in India and Pakistan: Trends of the Past Decade*, offers a detailed comparative assessment of how the two largest states in South Asia have pursued defence modernisation. The author examines procurement trends, technological innovation and institutional reforms that have shaped both countries' military capabilities. The analysis also considers how these developments influence the strategic balance and the prospects for stability within the subcontinent.

In *Reimagining Afghanistan: China's Path to Stability through a Regime-resistant Strategy*, Amit Kumar and Veena Ramachandran explore China's engagement with Afghanistan following the withdrawal of international forces. They analyse Beijing's approach to regional stability through economic cooperation, connectivity and cautious diplomacy, arguing that China's strategy is designed to manage change without any direct involvement in internal governance structures. The paper situates this policy within China's broader regional vision of long-term stability and pragmatic partnership.

Imran Khan's article, *Tacit Support or Strategic Failure? Reviewing US Withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Consequent Regime Change*, revisits the implications of US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The author evaluates the sequence of political and security developments that followed, and the broader consequences for regional actors. By analysing the strategic choices made by the United States and their regional reverberations, the study contributes to ongoing debates about external engagement, state-building and local agency in South Asia.

The Conference Report, prepared by Angelina Zsófia Nagy, summarises the discussions of *The Second Minsk International Conference on Eurasian Security*, which brought together policymakers, scholars and analysts to explore emerging regional security frameworks. The report provides an insight into how Eurasian states and institutions perceive the challenges of cooperative security and highlights efforts to develop new platforms for dialogue and coordination.

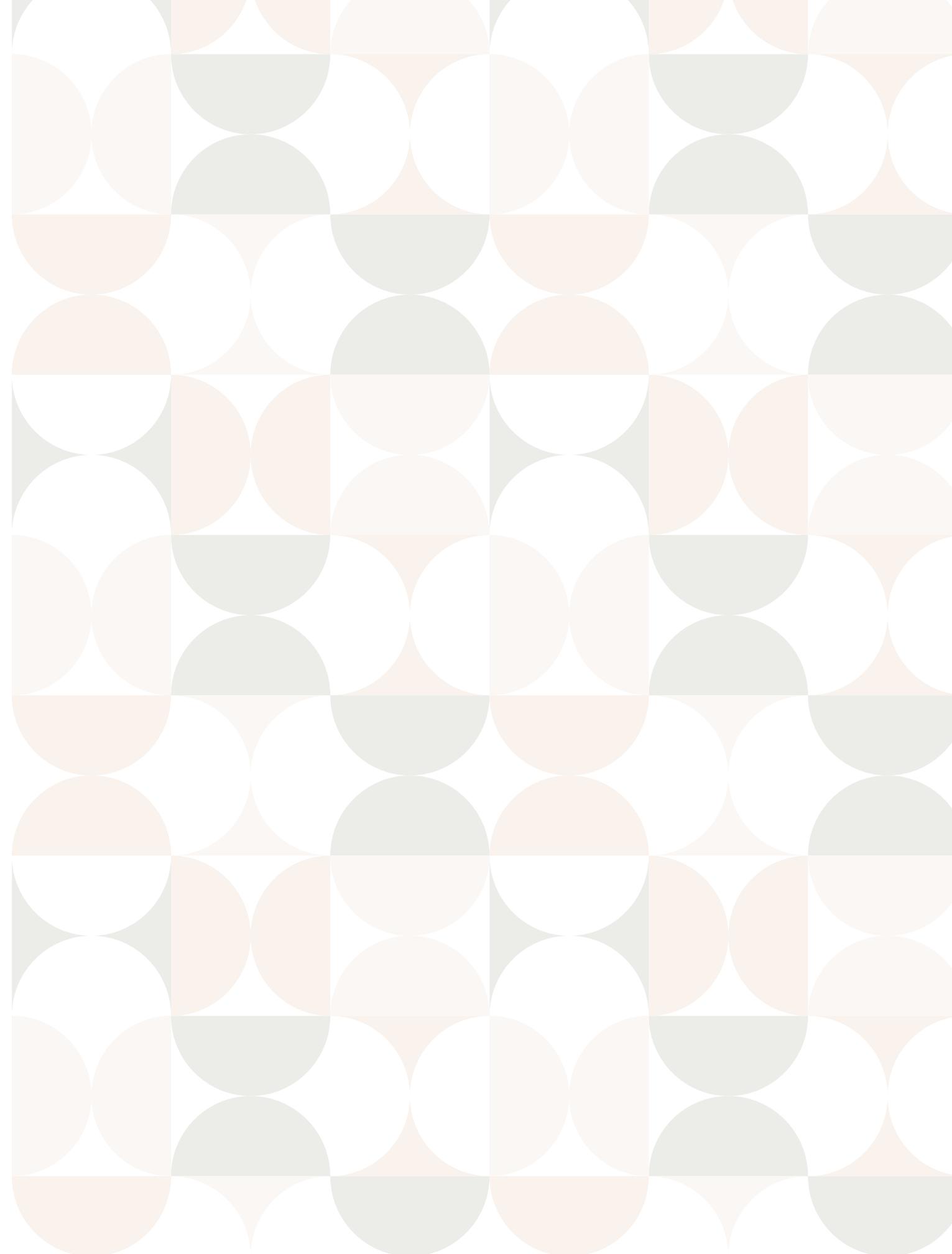
The issue concludes with László Sárkány's review of *Islamic Perspectives for a Sustainable Financial System*, edited by Mehmet Saraç and Mohammed Kabir Hassan. The review outlines the key

arguments of the volume, which situates Islamic finance within broader debates on ethical and sustainable economic models, offering perspectives on the integration of moral principles and market mechanisms in financial governance.

Taken together, the studies presented in this issue underscore the increasing complexity and diversity of Eurasian transformations. Rather than describing a uniform process, they reveal multiple trajectories through which states and regions adapt to global interdependence, technological change and evolving conceptions of sovereignty and development. The analyses highlight both continuity and innovation in foreign and economic policy, as actors across the continent seek to reconcile national priorities with the demands of an increasingly interconnected world.

Eurázsia Szemle remains committed to fostering research that bridges disciplinary and regional perspectives. By bringing together analyses on North Eurasia, South and Southeast Asia and the broader Global South, this issue contributes to a deeper understanding of how economic and political transitions unfold within a multipolar environment. The topic *Transforming Economies in a Multipolar Context* invites readers to consider how economic development, sustainability and international cooperation are intertwined in shaping the future of Eurasia and beyond.

Professor László Csicsmann, PhD
Deputy Editor-in-Chief
Eurázsia Szemle



I

**NORTH EURASIA
COLUMN**





GYÖNGYVÉR HERVAINÉ
SZABÓ – PÉTER SZATMÁRI

Russia's New Foreign Policy:
Together with the World's Majority

RUSSIA'S NEW FOREIGN POLICY: TOGETHER WITH THE WORLD'S MAJORITY

GYÖNGYVÉR HERVAINÉ SZABÓ¹ – PÉTER SZATMÁRI²

Abstract

Russia's war in Ukraine, accompanied by the international political and cultural sanctions, made it necessary for Russia to develop a new foreign policy strategy in 2023. The Western narratives concerning Global South and leftist critical colonial theories and policies made the third-world country foreign policy model self-evident in new situation. The aim of this study is to place the development of the new foreign policy in a geopolitical, strategic context using the civilisation state discourse and approaches of New Russian Empire theories. The task is to explain the official and informal methods and tools of foreign policy-making, the first track and second track symphonic foreign policy to which the Russian Orthodox Church is attuned, tools of politics of history, diplomatic memory policies and to evaluate the results of public diplomacy and propaganda. The third part of the study evaluates the results of the policy for the World Majority from different angles. The result is that Russia was successful in diplomacy matters towards the Global South, could deal well with BRIC countries and could strengthen its role in Africa. Its successes caused punitive US impacts for African and BRIC countries, tension for the EU, Ukraine and France, and led to the awakening of the Non-Aligned Movement group of countries, gaining new content for neutrality without punishment.

Keywords: state civilization, world majority, New Russian Empire, politics of memory, neutrality

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1. Introduction

In our former studies (Hervainé, 2021), *Russia in Global Order*, we analysed the geopolitical and historical embeddedness of Russian strategic culture, the cyber-military-fiscal-intelligence state model as a permanent structure of the Russian state from Peter the Great. This fiscal-military state model was a Western imperial model for colonisation, and its characteristics are permanently analysed in the case of the US too, from its origin to the modern era. The recent study attempts to analyse new thinking, the tools and the results of foreign policy behind the scenes of European war. Western thinkers saw primacy in the decision-making role of intelligence services behind Russian foreign policy, but they undervalued the role of military order in foreign policy-making. In 2013, Russia began a new Eastern turn in foreign policy, with the slogan “Toward the Great Ocean”. The foreign policy was later organised around geopolitical regions. During the decade, Eurasia and Asia became the main vector in the foreign policy, aiming for balance between the US and China. During this decade, the Euro-Atlantic geopolitical space lost its importance, and Russia started to withdraw itself from Western institutions. These Eastern foreign policy dreams failed because of Russia's economic weakness. We are witnessing the consequences of the war in Europe and thinking about a Russian foreign policy which ceased to exist. The task of the study is to explore the resources, concept and tools of the new Russian foreign policy. Our approach is based on a balanced investigation; on Russian documents, facts and opinions pro and contra; and evaluating results. The methods cover the theoretical base, official and unofficial tools and actions, identity and ideological constructions and everyday practices. The question is whether the new foreign policy goals are realistic or well underpinned or will have a fate similar to Russia's former Great Eastern dreams.

2. Towards a new ‘sovereign’ foreign policy course for Russia

2.1. Subjection of Russia in the new European Order

The new European Order was established in 1990 with a European Charter at an EU summit, with the involvement of Russia. The Charter of Paris for a New Europe named those institutions which were involved for international cooperation purposes in the security, economic, governmental, human rights, social, environmental and cultural sphere. Russia was involved in NATO's scope from 1991 until 2004. NATO's and the EU's enlargement policies from 2000 were open, expansionist Greater Europe programmes. The Central European Three Seas Initiative (3SI) from 2015 was a new platform for renewing transatlantic relations between CEEC countries and received investment from the EU and the US. The 3SI, as a forum, acted as a response to the Russian intervention in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, which was the beginning to Moscow's step away from institutions of the new Europe Order.

The liberal extremism of dissidents, like Khodorkovsky, contributed to the development of the idea of Russia as a loose network of city states (similar to Singapore) – instead of a Russian state – called *Garðaríki*³, and added a ten-point indicator for induction (Michel, 2024). Therefore, starting a war in Europe is a tool for Russia engagement with European powers to change the new European Order, a tool for securing historical borders. The war in Ukraine was heralded an answer to Western interventions (colour revolutions) and as a “usual campaign” for pushing the borders towards Western territories as in the years during the Time of Troubles.

2.2. State civilisation and the Russian global policy for dismantling new European rules

State civilisation in the 90s was a communist concept developed by Zyuganov, the party leader. In 2012, state civilisation as a model for Russia appeared first in Putin's thinking, then was later used in foreign policy as a concept for Russian policy concerning near-abroad, CIS states and confronting Western universalism. It was subsequently used for political interventions against Ukraine as an artificial state along the confrontation lines of civilisations (Huntington's theory). State civilisation, as a definition, was accepted in the Constitution and became an official term for Russian polity. The first foreign policy concept based on this term entered circulation in 2023. During the Ukrainian-Russian political, economic and military confrontations of the last decade, the state-civilisation concept was crucial for explaining historical experiences of confrontations with the West; elaborating Russian positions concerning Ukrainian stateness and coercive national minority policies; and elaborating on the Russian global concept and foreign policy tools. The main driver of the Russian global foreign policy was the Russian Orthodox Church, aiming at influencing Russian diaspora churches, in contrast to the Patriarch of Constantinople's right to diaspora communities. The main mission was the Russian Orthodox Church's influence in Ukraine or to start a new church in Ukraine. In developing the Ukrainian national church, which was elaborated with American intervention, Joe Biden was highly involved in forming an autocephalous church in Ukraine instead of a dissident Church of VOC, under the US-oriented Patriarch of Constantinople.

State civilisation as a political theory recently started to change the narratives of Russian foreign policy intellectual circles during military confrontations in Ukraine with the so-called Collective West, the new type of subjective foreign policies of the US and in the emerging conservative state ideologies. Ivan Timofeev, Russian political adviser, in the study of 23 May 2023 for the Valdai Discussion Club explained: The term replaces that formerly known as the realist concept of foreign policy principles and modernist ideologies of liberalism, socialism, conservatism, nationalism and combinations thereof. State civilisation as a theoretical framework is useful for new concepts as a territorial, political unit involving diaspora policies, but it has problems concerning former empires, constant wars of empires and owing to the contrasting nature of civilisation and sovereignty. The

³ *Garðaríki* was the old Norse name of Russian city states developed by Varangians with Novgorod (*Hólmgarðaríki*) in the 10th century. (Rus, the land of a thousand cities)

problem with the theory of state civilisation is that, in its current form, Russia is a modern Western capitalist state, and it is hard to think of it as a traditional society. The conflict with the Western world is not a conflict of civilisational identities, but it is a conflict of interests. The third factor concerning state civilisation is the Western orientation of states. Most countries of the world do not wish to choose between the West and non-West because it is acceptable and beneficial for them, and orthodox culture – for them – seems distant and particular. Thus, it has recently not been possible for state civilisation to fulfill the role of political ideology or replace Western modern political ideologies, but it is useful for foreign political aims (Timofeev, 2023). In analyses of A. Miller, the state nation or the nation state models are not compatible with Russian reality, because both are focused on single nation building and political loyalty, while multi-ethnic state building is missing from both. Soviet-Russian ethnoterritorial, non-democratic federalism can hardly be transformed into democratic federalism. While Russian and other people's interethnic relations remained stable, the nature of Russian policy is more authority and power-focused, the best outcome being the rehabilitation of the “empire” for its statehood (Miller, 2025). The Russian empire consequently became an official topic in Valdai discussion forums.

2.3. Achieving great power status as a precondition for the new foreign policy

For Russia, achieving great power status was a complex task after losing its global position with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and being included in the new European Order as a normal country. The adaptation to the new European Order came with membership in Western European governmental organisations, along with EU/NATO foreign policy enlargement. Russia was a member of the G8 organisation, but was treated by the CoE and EU as one of the small states in Greater Europe policies. Russia had the chance to change this situation with 2014 Crimean and Ukrainian actions, turning the foreign policy focus onto the Normandy format and acting in conflict resolution with the exclusion of European Union foreign service power. The Normandy format, as a return to the great power and nation state foreign policy, was successful in sitting to the table France and Germany. The next step was the war against ISIL and the Syrian civil war, and Russia's opportunity to gain its great power role in the Middle East region. This was an important step in transforming Russia into a great power on African territory.

Russia's return to Africa was organised through Russian state oligarchic and private oligarchic firms, and activities of foreign intelligence services. The Wagner Group was formerly the only active party in the extractive industry, but after the Prigozhin coup and march towards Moscow, the Russian official army took over private military mercenaries and their enterprises. Russia's return to Africa began in 2016, and became dynamic from 2019. The diplomatic return to Africa was based on the global media presence in the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi and the 2018 FIFA World Cup, since Russia had left Africa since the breakup of the Soviet Union and only former state debts remained as a memento of friendship. The invitation of world leaders to these events served as an opening for new relations. These two global events placed Russia, Sochi, on the global media map, and in 2019, inviting the state head to a Russia-Africa summit proved successful and was

of symbolic importance. The summit was a diplomatic event, focused on statements accenting a sovereignty of states (contrasting with France, Britain as a colonial power and presence), on Russia's role against colonisation and Africa's decolonisation, its role against racism and crushing apartheid systems. The next topic was the new multipolar world order, and the involvement of Africa's power therein. The third topic was the value of families and political confrontation with new Western intersectional approaches as criteria for democracy and development programmes, causing conflicts in African governmental policies, too. The common origin was Russia's development of a new organ, the Sovereign Development International Organisation, to deal with foreign aids and its trade policy. Russia, with strong diplomacy round tours, military action, Russian global programmes and harmonious church diplomacy and memory diplomacy, reached great power status in Africa alongside the US, UK, France, China, Türkiye and Iran (Ramani, 2021). Russia is far behind China, the US and UK in soft power and economic power, but the return proved successful.

3. Resources for great power diplomacy

3.1. Transforming Russia's economy for great power diplomacy

Eurasianist foreign policy elites and experts made frequent criticisms of Russian foreign policy because it engaged only with Euro-Atlantic policy goals. Karaganov, the leading foreign policy expert from the 1990s, tried to organise Russian elites for the purpose of developing Russian Asia. From 2000, Karaganov and Sojghu developed the "Pivot to the East" project and influenced Putin to make it an official project. Karaganov connects it to the new civilisation platform of the World Majority, with a new Siberian capital (Tobolsk).

The modernisation of Russia and development its natural, spatial and economic potential is the most strategic question because of the Russian economy's weak potential. Behind foreign policy programmes, the absence of a Siberian economic power source is a constant problem. The latest document was discussed at the 2025 St. Petersburg International Business Forum. It was an absolute failure selling it as investment for development. A Siberian Development Plan was developed by an expert from the Russian Academy of Sciences (300th anniversary), citing Lomonosov's foresight that "Russian power will grow through Siberia and the Northern Ocean". Siberia, currently a Federal District with 16.7 million inhabitants, but together with the Far Eastern Federal District with close to 8 million inhabitants and 0.800 HDI indicators, as a territory of 12 million square metres, forms a special "region" for development. What is ready is the Siberian regional plan. In the former "colonial type of plans were development resources for national economies, exploiting Siberia for state and private corporations, discrimination was the absence of planning for development. The main question is, when developing a state model – is it for central planning, the market economy, using a developmental state structure, or developing a regional model? The Chinese economic zones and poles model or Alaska's corporative model can be used and applied to Siberia's development. But how is a region in an era involving an acute phase of geopolitical confrontation with the collective

West to be developed when the economy is for the domestic market (survival economy)? During the war in Russia, Russia's economy was a mobilisation economy, where all resources are accumulated to counter threats to the country's existence. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the mobilisation economy was managed under emergency circumstances. The sanctions, import substitutions, illegal imports and competition with "single suppliers" caused the primitivisation of Russian and Siberian economics, transferring it to survival economics. This analysis highlights important lessons concerning the impact of sanctions, too.

3.2. New empire, new myths and narratives

The Russian state civilisation and Russian global narrative and historical debates concerning ancient RUS were underpinned by Viking and Christian myths, narratives about choosing the Mongol Yoke, and so on. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the Eurasianist group became the main political power in framing Russian foreign policy culture. Karaganov's Siberianisation of Russia integrated new imperial myths: the Scythian Empire, the Scythian-Siberian world of archaeology for political use. Karaganov sees the 1000 BC era as ideal, when in Europe the Celtic, and in Eurasia the Scythian cultures stretched from modern Hungary to Siberia. The Scythian Empire is, at its core, rooted in Russian literary and political culture. This Scythian model made the emergence of the Mongolian-Chinese Empire possible, and allowed for the potential meeting of Alexandr Nevsky with Kublai in Karakorum. This is a potential common point in historical Chinese-Russian connections (this historical meeting was not approved by either Chinese or Russian historians). Siberia, in Karaganov's thesis, is a place for liberty, open thinking, endless possibilities, a space without borders, where man can travel to infinity towards God. If we try to evaluate the Scythian spatial territory, this means that not only Ukraine, but the whole Carpathian area became part of the Russian political elite's imperial dreams and sphere of influence.

3.3. Resolving the mission deficit for Russia

Dmitry Yefremenko, in his study, "The Resources of Russia's Great-Power Status, sees the main resource for a new policy in breaking the connection with the West. The disconnection of Russia from the West is equivalent to deciding not to pay tribute to Mongols, not to go to Karakorum or Saraj for jarlyk (the appointment of princes). This, in the case of Moscow, was the result of achieving a power status (derzava), growth, material and non-material power, strong political will, cultural growth and a state mission (*I think this act needed a successful battle at Kulikovo as well*). The recent deepening confrontation with the West provides an opportunity for a new foreign policy, called the World Majority Policy. This policy can resolve "the mission deficit" of Russian foreign policy. The Special Military operation is a military action aiming at the internal integration of Russia. The fact that Russia ceased to be going for collection of jarlyk to the West became a long-term problem for the West, because it requires dealing with a great power along their borders (Yefremenko, 2025).

3.4. Shifts in Russia's foreign policy concept

Russia's foreign policy concepts from 2008 are the key documents alongside the national security strategy and military doctrine concerning foreign policy actions. The years 2007-2008 were crucial because, following the Munich speech by Putin, these documents reflected Russia's position as a great power, its aim of spreading Russian influence abroad and the protection of the rights and interests of Russian citizens in other countries. From 2008, Russia turned from a European economic cooperation to the Eurasian economic cooperation, and moved from a common security system to the CSTO, a Russian-led military alliance. The 2009 National Security Strategy states that the emerging system of international relations is multipolar, in which Russia is equal to other great powers. The 2010 military doctrine made it possible to deploy Russian troops in order to protect Russian citizens abroad. The document allowed it to act as a great power in the Middle East. The 2012 foreign policy concept gave priority to the Eurasian Economic Union, the CIS countries, evaluating NATO as a threat to international security. In this document Russia is a pole in a multipolar world, with an influence in the near abroad, in an economic region from Lisbon to Vladivostok. The 2016 foreign policy concept highlighted a just international order, the role of global influence, emergence of network alliances, effective protection of Russian rights residing abroad, growing Russia's role in international culture. The civilisational dimensions became new factors, similarly the force. The 2016 concept gives priority to CIS states, the EAEU, the CSTO, for Ukraine and Moldova, NATO, the EU and US. This document emphasises that Moscow is no longer interested in maintaining good relations with the West, with a focus on cooperation with China.

4. Defining the contours of a new foreign policy

4.1. The transformation of foreign policy vectors in 2023

The 1212 "Pivot to the East" of Russian foreign policy was more of a declaration and less reflective of traditional vectors of foreign policy. The main highlights of 2023's foreign policy concept are full of ideological and identity-based statements:

- Russia is a unique country/civilization and a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power;
- a cultural and civilisational community of the Russian world;
- plays an active role in shaping the contemporary system of international relations;
- contributes to eliminating the global system of colonialism;
- one of the sovereign centres of global development;
- has a mission for maintaining the global balance of power; and
- it is a builder of the multipolar international system.

The new regional vectors of Russia's foreign policy, in priority order, are: near abroad (instead of CIS), the Arctic, the Eurasian continent: China, India, the Asia Pacific region, the Islamic World, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, European region (unfriendly states, NATO, EU, CoE), the US and other Anglo-Saxon states, Antarctica. The document analyses in detail the foreign policy's direction. The document does not mention the Collective West, omitting countries of the World Majority. The position of concrete countries on the list has changed, which reflects the new realities.

Liu, F. (2022), a Chinese expert analysing Russia's foreign policy over the past three decades, assessed the initial years as pro-Western (1991-1995), multipolar (1996-2000), based on great power pragmatism (2001-2004), neo-Slavist (2005-2008), based on stability and cooperation (2009-2013) and great power diplomacy. Great power diplomacy from 2014 consisted of confronting the West (sanction wars), turning to the East (cooperation with China, partnership with India and the ASEAN), maintaining a dominant role in CIS countries and returning to the Middle East.

Seungsoo, H. (2023), a South Korean expert, summarised the 2023 concept as extremely aggressive, ideological and propagandistic, as it maintains its combative stance against Western states, particularly the US. South & North Korea are omitted from the document, and every diplomatic effort is required to prevent a North Korea-China-Russia coalition from becoming a reality.

In the 2023 foreign policy concept, the regional track is very important in the shadow of Russia's war in Ukraine. It focuses on the Global South: China, India, Latin America, the Islamic world and Africa. Africa is evaluated as a distinctive and influential centre of world development under the West's neocolonial policy. The West is hostile, and the aims are peaceful coexistence and strategic parity (Gould-Davies, 2023).

4.2. The concept and agency of the World Majority

The concept of the World Majority is frequently broached, together with the Collective West, a key concept of Russian think-tank organisations. Karaganov, Kramarenko and Trenin created a concept towards the World Majority, and it is found on the home page of the Foreign Ministry under the heading: reports (27 Dec. 2023.) This document – in contrast to the foreign policy concept which made for a governmental cycle and a list of tasks and actions – seems to be a strategic document intended for 15-20 years.

The document states that since the start of the special military operation, the Russian foreign policy space has split in two. First is the US-led coalition of states seeking the isolation of Russia and involved in the proxy war in Ukraine. The other is the Rest, countries with a neutral position on the Ukrainian conflict and the benevolent, constructive group. The conflict served as a catalyst to the emergence of the World Majority (WM). Russia's victory in Ukraine may lead to a world order based on cultural and civilisational diversity. The vanguard of the WM is BRICS and the SCO. The aim is to help countries of the WM to dismantle neocolonial dependencies and strengthen regional identities, helping cultural and civilisational values, and, instead of aid, put an emphasis on the

cooperation of states. This transformation needs 10-15 years and requires critical mass. Japan and South Korea need emancipation. Europe and the Anglosphere will slip two separate civilisations.

The concrete WM strategy consists of:

- ensuring Russia's systemic presence in growing markets,
- developing new logistic corridors,
- developing trade and economic ties,
- implementing joint technological, biotechnological and ICT projects,
- accelerating efforts to shift the centre of Russia's spiritual and material development towards the East.

More specifically, the key functional aspects of Russia's strategy towards the WM concern Siberia, its connections with the Middle East, and Africa adding North-South routes to China's BRI projects, and a new institutional system mirroring the recent West, using soft foreign policy tools to understand Russia's role in the new development (Karaganov et al., 2023).

The World Majority needs an agency, similar to during the Cold War. The US sanctions led to the awakening of the countries of the Non-Aligned Movement. China and Russia decided to join this movement, and asked for official member status with a desire to transform the organisation into an active policymaking forum in contrast to recent reactive policy practice (Safranchuk, 2025).

The World Majority Policy needs great powers and new poles in the multipolar world order, multilateral organisations such as BRICS and the SCO. Russia's presence at this forum's events is crucial but has recently become complicated at presidential level. Russia aims to transform BRICS from a symbolic international organisation into a real power. BRICS became the target of the new tariff policy under Trump, who sent a message to the Rio Summit, adding a 10% tariff increase payable by member states or a 100% tariff increase in the case of declaring an anti-dollar policy.

4.3. The diplomacy of summitry for regional engagement in Africa

The summit format is used by China, Europe and the UK in Africa. Russia's main goal is to transform its role as the most influential power in Africa, turning some states into regional powers. There were two summits organised in 2019 and 2023. At the first Sochi Summit, 92 international agreements, contracts and memoranda were signed for USD 12.5 billion. At the second summit, the focus was political: dealing with problems of the colonial past, the independence of countries, gaining real sovereignty. Similar to BRICS, they accepted a 74-point declaration, organised 74 intergovernmental meetings, but there were yet to be any finished projects or other results since 2019. Putin announced the cancellation of the 23 billion African debt. The summit started with an initiative led by South Africa to end the Ukrainian war in the former state-border framework. Some countries (such as Uganda) explained that the hegemonic wars could not be approved. Putin stopped and reversed the initiative, and the new Black Sea Grain Agreement, but instead offered 25-50,000 tonnes of grain

for six countries. It was clarified at the summit that energy is of greatest priority in Africa, especially the primacy of nuclear energy. The summit was important for the francophone countries. Finally, in 2023-24, Russia was able to send and sell 136 million tonnes of grain (USD 16.5 billion) to Africa, as well as arrange a deal for another food export (USD 33 billion). Russia transformed military aid from private to state, launching peacekeeping missions for extractive goods in 20 countries. At the 2025 Russia-Africa Partnership Forum, Putin announced that Russia-Africa bilateral trade had reached 40 billion dollars and gained economic sovereignty for African countries. These results seem weak compared with former colonial powers, Türkiye or China, but they were an enormous task for Russian firms (Klomegah, 2024).

Figure 1: Russia's activity in Africa



Source: Bugayova, 2019, Russia's activity in Africa map

The Russian WM policy was successful according to US CFR analyst Ferragamo, M. (Ferragamo, 2023), and Russia could challenge the US in Africa. Russian presence was weaker in trade, but the governmental relations became friendly. Russia stands behind autocratic governments (in the case of West Africa, the influence is strong), contributed to military coups, the Russian private military armies causing conflicts, threatening democratic governments, influencing the militarisation of governments and the deterioration of human rights (Ferragamo, 2023).

Russia's military presence consists of military trade, building military operation bases (Sudan military port), the organisation of African votes in the UN in the case of a multipolar world order or Ukraine resolutions, preventing the sending of peacekeeping UN troops to Ukraine and preventing the treatment of Russia as a pariah state at UN forums. In 2022 Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, visited Egypt, Kongo, Uganda and Ethiopia, demonstrating great power diplomacy. The result was 25 neutral votes from 54 countries.

The Russian strategy for Africa was so successful that in 2025 it was extended to include a new vector: for Arabic states (Saad, 2025). The tools are similar: development centres for Russian Houses, cultural diplomacy, investment in security solutions, expanding economic ties.

5. Tools for great power image and practice development

5.1. Informal, hybrid and shadow economic tools

Russian presence is mostly organised using informal tools, the deployment of a mercenary army, disinformation actions, informal military trade for precision extractive commodities. The main countries are the Central African Republic, Mali and Sudan. Russians have an important actor, Abdel al Sisi, the president of Egypt, helping with Russian military fleet placement along African seaports. Russia is Egypt's main military supplier and awarded USD 25 billion credit for El Dabaa nuclear power station near Cairo through Rosatom. Russia could gain Uganda pivot to Russia. Ethiopia became a key organiser of summits alongside Russia, for helping African Union policy (Siegle, 2022). In 2022, Russia conducted a disinformation campaign in 16 countries, in 13 of which with the help of the Wagner Group (military actions, political interventions, using Wagner's enterprises and oligarchic firms). The strongest cooperation was developed with South Africa under the BRICS framework. The main result is the 14-fold oil export growth. These new trends also caused tensions with the US for South Africa. The US government approved its Sub-Saharan

Africa strategy, planning summits and new investments, but was unable to agree with governments on American aids, and reversed the military governments in Africa (Ferragamo, 2023). Amira Goudimi, a Turkish researcher, stated that Russia's African policy was effective, and it is not in Russian and Chinese, French, EU or Turkish interests. The results can be measured by facts, active diplomatic relations, new trade agreements and networks, investments in extractive industries,

diamond trade, international aid programmes and strategic investments of Gazprom, Rosatom, Lukoil and Rostec (Goumidi, 2023).

5.2. Orthodoxy for the World Majority – The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as part of civilisational foreign policy

The main driver of state civilisation-centred Russian global policy was the ROC. The ROC changed its thinking following the breakup of the Soviet Union and maintained its influence in new CIS states as well. But in Baltic States, the former diaspora churches established in Nordic countries returned and registered as legal personalities and joined the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (EPC) under US influence. The EPC treated the Orthodox Church in new states as diaspora, belonging to its legal framework. Those believers who remained within the framework of the ROC were treated by the Baltic states as “religious foreigners”.

In Ukraine, following a long process, the EPC, with contributions from Joe Biden, could form an autocephalous church. In a report by the Russian Foreign Ministry, the Kiev authorities liquidated the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC belonging to the ROC) and created a schismatic Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). Giving Tomos (the right of self-governorship) to the UOC, a schismatic church, the Russian Orthodox Church left the community of the Eastern Orthodox Church (15 national churches) causing the greatest schism in the history of Eastern Orthodoxy. The ROC declared those churches who voted for the OCU as hereditary and decided to see themselves as a new centre of Eastern Orthodoxy: returning to the ROC, the Crimean Church and all churches of Russian diaspora throughout the world.

The ROC has gained a special status in the Russian Constitution; with legal tools in interfering in state matters, in military leadership, maintaining chaplaincies, it has enormous wealth, trade monopolies, enterprises and stocks, and has a similar role to Russian foreign multinational firms. The Russian global foreign policy was initiated by the ROC, and it is active in new para-states of Little Russia.

With the beginning of the Ukrainian war, the ROC started to develop itself as a global church like the Vatican, with the capacity to act in foreign policy. The structural changes are next – the ROC developed into a complex structure: the Moscow Patriarchate, it has 5 autocephalous churches (Lettish, Moldovan, Russian Abroad, Ukrainian, Estonian), 4 exarchates (Belorussian 1988, exarchate of Africa 2021, Western Europe 2018 and South-East Asia 2018), institutions abroad (spiritual centres in Geneva, Korea, Turkmenistan, Canada, USA, Italy, Jerusalem, Belgrade), embassy to European IGOs, autonomous churches in Japan, Finland and China. The ROC canonical spatial function became global; the Russian world is only part of its activity and broke with ethnophile tendencies (Russian ethnic church).

The new concept is based on turning to ancient Orthodox communities of the Mediterranean Sea, the Church of the East, with Coptic, Ethiopian, Syrian, Nubian and Aksum communities. These communities fall under colonial European rule by the Patriarch of Alexandria. Russian Orthodoxy was first introduced in North Africa and strengthened, following white emigration, as the original

Eastern church. The newly established Exarchate of Africa has two eparchies, North and South Africa, and its aim is the evangelisation of Africa with a missionary mission, church development in all countries, with social, educational and enterprise institutions. In 2024, the canonical area of the exarchate covered the entire continent; there were 350 local parishes with 260 ministers in 34 countries. The most populous is the Kenya Church with 100 parishes. The registration of churches was successful in countries under Islamic jurisdiction, in centralised francophone countries and in decentralised countries under British law (Belyayev, 2025). The Exarchate of Africa hit the canonical area of the Patriarch of Alexandria belonging to the EPC and caused tensions because 72 ministers left it for the ROC. They became official religious workers with salaries and standard services.

The ROC started educating for African services in English and French language liturgy and local spiritual services. The first seminary students started the work in 34 countries. It led to a war with the Patriarch of Alexandria. The ROC introduced new parishes with the erection or buying of church buildings, schools, social programmes, dealing with internal refugees, publishing Orthodox Christian documents in 10 African languages with French and English texts dealing with spiritual tasks for believers. Finally, from the 300 people planning to change from the Patriarch of Alexandria to the ROC in Africa, and 227 of them could get contracts, the 40% of 715 ministers of CP (Maximov, 2025). The number of believers included the Russian private military members of 13 countries (who conducted 34 campaigns in 16 countries over the last 3 years). In Mali, Syria and Libya, military presence is lacking. In these countries, the Russian global programmes are connected to the ROC's activities. The main mission for the ROC in Africa is not the services of Russian diaspora, but the evangelisation of Africa, the development of truly African churches and parish services by maintaining local costumes, traditions, languages and cultures, with local ministers via the Hellenistic approaches of Eastern Christianity. This new role of the ROC was legitimated by the meeting of Pope Francis and patriarch Kirill in Havana. The last part of the African mission is to help Africa against leftist radical, tradition-banning LGBTQ practices along with conservative values (Suslov, 2024). The Asian Exarchates in 13 countries have 4 eparchies (Singapore, Thailand, Korea, Philippines-Vietnam, serves 80 parishes with 81 clerics, serves 80% of local believers and 3,000 families with humanitarian help. In Europe, Paris is at the centre, but after the aegis of sanctions and the banning of Russian organisations, in a lot of countries the ROC's local church was banned.

The missionary activity of the ROC in Africa is accompanied by programmes and the help of Russian firms and private military groups, and patriarchs of exarchates work as full-time ambassadors and deal with governments and attempt to obtain a role of state-approved or embedded churches. The wealth of the ROC in Africa paves the way for the emergence of a new clerical class in Africa.

5.3. Winning the heart of the intellectuals – Memory diplomacy for the global majority

The memory politics of Russia in Europe was formed as an answer for new European member states and EU official memory policy concerning the memory of the communist past (such as the holocaust), memory of WWII and responsibility for the outbreak of the war, and the memory of wars of Baltic and Ukrainian states with Russia concerning a 1,000-year history. Similar memory programmes and conflicts between China and Russia were avoided, while Russia was among colonial powers, who abused China during 200 years of submitting, or the borders were discussed. In other parts of the world, Russia developed a strong memory diplomacy in Track 2 form. In Moscow, a statue for Myanmar heroes of the Mandalay battle, who fought against the Nazis, was erected in the Park of Patriots. In Vietnam and Laos, the memory of the Vietnam-US war is an obligatory item of every meeting. In Laos, Russian military training personnel are an object of memory. In Singapore, the main memory topic is Sukarno's fight against the Dutch with Russian military tools. In Thailand, memory is based on the friendship between Tsar Nicholas II and the Siam Kingdom. Vietnam, Laos and Indonesia voted in favour of Russia at the UN on the topic of Ukraine. Lavrov's African tours were accompanied by memory agendas. In South Africa, the role of the Soviet Union in abolishing the apartheid system is vivid. Jose Cabarello, foreign policy expert, sees the memory policy, the nostalgia for a Russian presence in Africa as a strategic value, and the Russian state as an anti-colonial power has become accepted, strengthened by memory diplomacy, as a state which never was a colonial power in Africa, never involved in slave trade and stood firmly behind African anti-colonial movements in Angola and Mozambique (Caballero, 2023).

The Valdai Club, the institutes of the Russian State Academy, started a programme for developing global Russian memory politics, for the revitalisation of the Soviet Union's Third World Policy and explained it as a historical value of humanities. They began to form a pantheon of Russian-foreign cooperation partners in the Third World, such as Jiang Zemin, chief CCP secretary in China, Sukarno, president, in Bandung, in Korea, in Japan or in the Middle East, or Fidel Castro. The homepage of the Russian Foreign Ministry, under 'foreign policy/historical materials' content, documents historical colonial and crime actions, aggressions of Western states. The FPRI in Philadelphia sees these historical narratives as tools of propaganda in Africa. Decolonisation, de-Westernisation and modernisation constitute the key message. Russia is a protector of African countries against foreign interventions, liberalism. The ROC, Russian global funds, Russian MIR foundation and Rossotrudnichestvo activity are coordinated in Africa. There are 7 Russian Houses in Africa; Russian language training is organised in 10 countries. In 2024, Kirill announced that Russian Orthodoxy is the true faith, the ROC is the true church in contrast to colonial churches involved in slave trade and local conflicts among tribes (Snigr, 2024).

Jade McGlynn evaluated this policy as part of national security strategies of 2014, 2021 and 2023 foreign strategy concepts, and memory policy became an export tool. The export of memory, forming memory clubs and alliances, dealing with memory wars and organising memory defence manifested in the following actions:

- Memory export: memory export is at the core of memory diplomacy for geopolitical purposes, such as the 1. Saint George ribbon from 2009, which can give the Russian embassies to Volunteers of Victory, mainly to members of Russian diaspora (30,000 were given in 30 countries). The volunteers became active in 90 countries, in 23 cities of the USA with 10,000 new ribbons distributed from 2019. 2. Memory of the Immortal Regiment, a parade honouring portraits of those who contributed to the Great Patriotic War efforts. 3. Victory Dictation is a test of knowledge of WWII; the Victory Waltz is a dance competition performed to WWII songs among expatriates. There are Roads of Victory tours in Eastern Europe to see the Red Army battle sites.
- Memory alliances are known as narratives, when Russia contributed to different events in the history of a target country: such as the creation of a modern Greek state, fighting against Japan in China.
- Memory offences and conflicts targeted memory rivals, Poland, Ukraine, Baltic States, the UK, US, EU. These actions became important amid Western and Russian propaganda.
- Memory defence became a central foreign policy goal concerning memories of WWII.

6. The impact of Russian foreign policy on the World “Minority”

Russian diplomacy challenged the new regionalist system of globalisation and regionalisation with a US presence in macroregional economic integrations, forming an alternative model to BRICS without the US, and forming the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). In the new geopolitics of the Ukrainian war, the former began to work against US interests and proved a highly useful organisation for Russia against US sanctions. The foreign policy concerning the World Majority attempts to transform the world order similar to the Cold War bipolar order. While the Ukrainian war and near-abroad policy breaks with the new European Order and returns Yalta's policy-of-influence zone, the World Majority policy reinforces the former North-South divide and Russia's influence as one of the prominent leaders of the South (as a member of BRICS).

6.1. Sharp reactions and the summitry of the US

The Biden administration and Europe evaluated Russia's war in Ukraine *as the decisive war between democracy and autocracy*, similar to the liberal- and fascist-order fight a century ago. All actions were thus pro-Ukrainian and attempted to gain victory over Russia to eliminate the country as a threat to global democracy. The sanction and the political and cultural blockade against Russia therefore caused a lot of tension among countries. Russia's pivot towards the Global South (GS) is a consequence of the isolation and blockade, as also explained by a Russian expert (Trenin). Russian activity in the Middle East, in Asia or in Africa caused a lot of problems for the US and the European states. The US approved the H.R.7311, Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act, for developing a

strategy to counter Russian efforts to undermine democratic institutions in Africa (USD 500,000 for 2022–2026).

The US Act concerning Russia's presence in Africa caused a sharp reaction from SADC Summit countries. They opposed the US making the African continent the target of unilateral and punitive measures, because Africa is not for sale. The 16 SADC state presidents were against the monitoring activity by the US and were against draconian sanctions of the Biden cabinet (Modern Diplomacy, 2022). Trump recently invited leaders of five small African countries for potential trade deals, offering them a 10% tariff. Trump decided to ban aid to African countries, while in some countries the uncertainty surrounding tariffs caused economic crises. The latest “tweets” by Trump on dismissing BRICS as an anti-American organisation will lead to a new confrontation with emerging regional powers, too. On 22–25 June 2025 at the 17th US-Africa Business Summit, a new 2.5 billion deal was signed, as a strategy for commercial diplomacy (U.S. Department of State, 2025).

6.2. Instead of the Global Gateway – a real problem for Europe

The main objective of Russian foreign policy is to dissolve the post-Cold War security order, based on the principle of the 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe, which affirms the right of states to choose their own international security systems. The European Union implemented policies to support Kyiv financially, politically and militarily. But the EU lacks a comprehensive strategy to address Russia's European revisionism of order, and acts in cycles: crisis, chaos, suboptimal and tactical solutions. It is inadequate to confront geopolitical challenges. As Majcin, J. argues, the EU needs a long-term strategy to deter Russia's revisionism, a type of Kennan's Long Telegram. The strategy can be built on two pillars: deterrence and containment. Deterrence is the responsibility of the EU Commissioner for Defence. The EU should strengthen Ukraine on the battlefield so that it cannot be forced into a ceasefire. The EU must resist any attempts by the US administration to impose peace terms on Ukraine. Deterrence can be implemented by punishment through sanctions and other measures. Containment is important not only on the European continent, but in candidate countries such as Georgia, Moldova (are they in Asia?). The EU must position itself as a more attractive partner to countries of the Global South. The Global Gateway is the European Union development programme, but it lacks transparency and finance, and serves European business interests. The EU's aim is to sign a free trade agreement with India, disrupting and weakening the China-Russia axis (Majcin, 2025). On 26 February 2024, Joseph Borrell, the head of EU diplomacy, declared that the era of Western dominance has indeed definitively ended, the Global South poses a real problem and current global geopolitical tensions continue to develop in a West-versus-the-Rest fashion (NEWS.am, 2024). On 25 February 2024 at the Munich Security Conference, Borrell explained that the EU's main geopolitical agenda is: more and quicker support for Ukraine, putting an end to the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza with the implementation of a two-state solution, improving our relationship with the Global South and strengthening our defence and security (EEAS, 2024).

6.3 Success of decolonisation – Losing France's foothold in Africa

The most important impact of the Russian presence in Africa is the growing concern of France as a former colonial power in West Africa. Following the Arab Spring events, the hostility towards France-oriented governments became strong, and these governments failed due to military coups. In January 2025, the final French troops left Africa. The colonial past has had an impact on every aspect of former colonies, and countries began to free themselves of colonial military statues, renaming streets, introducing local languages. Recently, Russian mercenaries and private and state troops took over the tasks of the former French military administration (Adémola, 2025). France has lost Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, the Ivory Coast and Senegal; the governments argued with defence of sovereignty in contrast to frequent military interventions (Grisin, 2025).

6.4. A new space for a geopolitical battleground for Ukraine against Russia

During the UN voting process, Ukraine understood the importance of Africa and opened new embassies. The Russian-Ukrainian war headed into Africa, Ukraine delivered actions against Russian troops, controlling and blocking the logistical places for military tools, attacked the Smolny ship (military education ship) and attacked the Wagner Group with Tuareg military units. From 2022, the SBU and DIU intelligence services attended military training for Tuareg jihadist soldiers. President Zelensky signed the decree, the rights of intelligence services against Russians anywhere in the world. In Sudan they processed a campaign against Russian mercenaries. The Ukrainian intelligence's presence in South Africa is strong because the former apartheid military services replaced their units in Ukraine, forming racist battalions (Schutte, 2025).

6.5. Awakening of Non-Aligned Movement countries and BRICS

The impact of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was important for Non-Aligned Movement countries and served as a catalyst for renewing its activity. The group (with more than 100 countries) began actions to revise the country neutrality definitions, because of using sanctions and punitive measures against those who are not willing for involving for global great power wars. The BRICS leader also condemned the tariff war (Trump tweeted 100% tariffs on BRICS if it decided on de-dollarisation), as it is against the recent official world trade tariffs.

7. Summary

Russian foreign policy towards the World Majority is part of a new foreign policy concept accepted in 2023. Earlier concepts were traditional, but there were shadow strategies behind the official one as a result of activities of Russian official think-tank circles: such as the 2012 concept Toward the Great Ocean. The 2023 concept placed the Near Abroad in first place, Arctic in second, India-China in third and Africa has a new role. Foreign policy towards the World Majority is a new shadow concept, and the authors have made it a long-term strategy. The sanctions and blockade around Russia are so strong that it was cut from former foreign policy space. The strategy – creating a policy

with the Rest - seems to be a long-term programme because of possible 15-20-year tensions with the West. Each document is weak, and a reaction to the situation. According to Russian experts, the problem lies in the heterogeneity of countries, with missing agency and the absence of an ideology, because these countries do not want a change to world order, and have recently acted in national interests. BRICS was at the centre of this policy, but this comprises strong regional players, and it is not capable of dealing with the problems of other countries. The strategy quashes the foreign policy and national development functions and cannot serve as a model for action. Russia's activity was strong towards these countries and it used the classic and new diplomatic tools in official and informal contexts. The diplomacy package consisted of state and church para-diplomacy tools and actions, using tools of economic and public diplomacy. Russian diplomacy could remain within the international community by BRICS, and strong Middle Eastern and African activity. It caused a problem for the US, for the EU, for Ukraine and for France because it proved an intervention into the former West-Rest relationship. The most important impact is a new rush for the resources of the Global South, a success in decolonisation in the case of France, the mobilisation of Africa and Non-Aligned Movement countries against punitive measures and a new world order for neutrality. Neither China nor the G7 states, G20, Russia, the EU, the US or the UN have no real strategic thinking towards these states. These countries need more justice in economy, more sovereignty, a greater voice in global affairs, do not want a change in the global international order and hate the situation involving conflicts, sanctions and punitive measures. Russia was partly successful in dealing with challenges, but its inherent economic weakness and the military-fiscal-state model fails to serve its economic recovery and for ending great power attitude.

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CATHERINE ENOREDIA
ODORIGE – SZILVIA KOVÁCS

*Bilateral Relationships
as a Comprehensive Approach
to Greening the Future*

BILATERAL RELATIONSHIPS AS A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO GREENING THE FUTURE: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON CHINA'S ENERGY SUSTAINABILITY ENGAGEMENT WITH HUNGARY AND NIGERIA

CATHERINE ENOREDIA ODORIGE¹ – SZILVIA KOVÁCS²

Abstract

China's energy dealings as the world's factory are important to climate change reversal. This research examines China's energy investment from its bilateral relationship perspective. China has a huge energy demand, hence its investment in green and brown energy. We investigate the impact of China's energy-sourcing relationships with Nigeria and Hungary from their energy policy approach. Resonating the co-benefit relevance in sustainable development. Countries rely on multilateral and bilateral relations to meet energy needs. This research explores China's energy-related bilateral relations with countries as dependent on the country's policy outlook on energy transition. Using a

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systematic literature review methodology, grounded in multi-level theory perspectives, we conduct a comparative analysis of China's energy dealings with two countries, Nigeria in Sub-Saharan Africa and Hungary in Central Europe. Both countries cooperate with China on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's energy dealing with Hungary is centred on battery manufacturing, a path-dependent evolution in the global automotive industry, Nigeria's vague energy transition policy making for a lopsided negotiations, win-lose with China as the winner. Nigeria's carbon-locked-in energy reality is a hindrance to negotiating support for a renewable energy transition with China. For Hungary, the shortened inspection period allows production without an adequate risk assessment, where residents expressed concerns about the hazardous material around manufacturing plant locations.

Keywords: energy transition, ecological civilization, green energy, fossil, CO₂, health, environment

JEL Codes: Q43, Q56, Q28, O19.

1. Introduction

The Paris Agreement of December 2015 saw many countries on the sidelines of global warming and sustainable development won over, with a commitment to join in the fight to reduce carbon dioxide emissions (CO₂) by searching for greener sources of energy. China, Hungary and Nigeria joined other countries that gave the Paris Agreement the nod.

Nigeria, in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), occupies an expanse of 923 thousand sq. km, and has an estimated population of 232.7 million, its GDP per capita is USD 806.95 by the end of 2024, and the Gini coefficient is 0.35 (Statista, 2024c). Its commitment at COP26, hosted in November 2021, is to become carbon neutral by 2060. An ambitious commitment to say the least, considering the huge political, economic and social challenges bedeviling the country over the years, which impacted its ability to provide social amenities and infrastructure including stable energy flows for homes, transportation, industrialisation and business investment to its ever-increasing population where only over half of the population have access to electricity. Those with access also have to deal with the challenge of rationing as provisions are not constant. However, in line with the announcement, it unveiled a transition plan and passed the Climate Change Act 2021.

Hungary is located within the central region of Europe (CEE), with a population of 9.562 million people, stretched across 93 thousand sq. km, GDP per capita is USD 23,310.75 by the end of 2024, based on global macro models and analyst expectations, while the Gini coefficient is 0.30 (Statista, 2024b). Hungary made a legal commitment in June 2020 to be carbon neutral by 2050. Its commitment as one of the European Union's member states is in line with the EU's dedication to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. To achieve the 2050 goal, the national energy policy has focused on enhanced renewable energy generation in the areas of nuclear energy, solar energy and wind turbine-driven energy, with all of this geared towards phasing out coal by 2030 (IEA50, 2024).

China, located in East Asia, with a population of 1.409 billion people, stretches across 9.6 million sq. km, GDP per capita is USD 13,303 by the end of 2024, while the Gini coefficient is 0.37 (Statista, 2024a). China leads the world in sustainable development resources. It produces, uses and exports the highest amounts of solar panels and wind turbines (Mathew, 2015; Mathews and Tan, 2015; Kim, 2017; Shen, Fu and Song, 2020; Sun and Huang, 2021). The Asian giant is also the highest emitter of CO₂ (IPCC, 2014; Zhang et al., 2019). This is not unrelated to the fact that China has become the industrial capital of the world, the world’s factory or workshop (Eleri, 1993, p. 106; Lin & Sun, 2010; Helm, 2012). For this reason, China has the highest carbon footprint count. Regardless of its 1.409 billion population, the average carbon footprint in pounds per person in China is set at 16,323.68 Ibs (World Bank, 2018). Research has, however, shown that between 12.2% and 14.1 % of this carbon footprint count is the result of foreign direct investment (Zhang et al., 2019). Its role as the world’s factory has however paid off, pulling several millions of its population out of poverty and achieving its goal of a moderately prosperous society in all respects (Xi Jinping, 2021, during the ceremony of the centenary of the Communist Party of China). Xi Jinping, China’s president, unveiled that China has set the stage to peak carbon emissions in 2030 and be carbon neutral in 2060.

Table 1. CO₂ emissions by country, 2024

| 2022 | CO ₂ emissions (MtCO ₂) | CO ₂ emissions per capita (tCO ₂ /cap) | CO ₂ emissions per GDP (tCO ₂ /\$1,000) | Share of global CO ₂ emissions (%) |
|----------------|--|--|---|---|
| China | 2,667.43 | 8.85 | 0.49 | 32.88 |
| Nigeria | 122.75 | 0.57 | 0.11 | 0.32 |
| Hungary | 47.29 | 4.95 | 0.14 | 0.12 |

Source: World Population Review, 2024

Note: Table 1 shows emissions by the three countries covered in this research. China tops the list as the second globally, coming behind the United States of America. Hungary and Nigeria are relatively smaller polluters because of their size, Hungary with a population of less than 10 million. Industrialisation also contributes heavily to pollution and China is at the forefront of this, hence the high figures.

Collaborative interdependencies reveal that progressive investments in green transformation are highly dependent on the expectation of co-benefits (Lema et al., 2021; Dubash, 2013; Schmitz, 2019). Leaders of countries are therefore coming together to seek out solutions to this common challenge as accentuated by Schmitz (2017) –that bilateral and multilateral alliances are the machinery driving climate change. The co-benefit theory emphasises the fact that climate change mitigation activities are only as relevant as helping to consolidate previous development or opening up new avenues for development that are helping to secure energy for populations, creating new jobs and income, increasing public revenue, fostering green industries and making them competitive through the improvement of local skills. Investing in green energy is therefore not a driver in itself but co-benefits the immediate priorities of the actors in collaborative interdependencies (Schmitz, 2017; Lema et al., 2021; Dubash, 2013), justifying a scholar’s conceptualisation of sustainable development goals as an oxymoron (Brown, 2015). However, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe,

in discussing co-benefits (UNECE, 2016), outlined the multiple benefits accruable to climate action: here, carbon-locked infrastructure and equipment give way to innovative initiatives for the development of efficient resources that foster economic security, in a sustainable way, with great consideration for the ecosystem or increase economic dynamism, which are, in the long run, not only about climate change.

2. Methodology

Use of a systematic literature review (SLR) qualitative analysis methodology, which helps to identify and evaluate relevant literature on a topic to reduce possible distortions from a restrictive selection of the body of literature and to attain reliability in the literature selected (Tranfield, Denyer & Smart, 2003). This helps in the synthesization of meaningful knowledge from a large number of studies (Clarke et al., 2020). According to Fisch and Block (2018), it is a unique way of identifying academic literature about a specific topic or research question in a systematic, transparent and reproducible format, for which they proffer a six-step process for achieving results which includes: motivation for the topic by stating the research question, systematically identifying relevant literature, choosing a balance between length and breadth, focusing on related concepts and deriving a meaningful conclusion following a coherent structure. Geels’ (2020) multi-level perspective (MLP) theory was developed to address sustainability’s complex nature, which is confined to socio-technical transformations. The MLP is a useful framework for analysing transitions because of its ability to accommodate both radical change *niches* as the locus of radical novelty and dynamic stability through the concept of *socio-technical regimes*, institutional assemblage systems and influences from broader contexts. Unlikely to remain constant during decades-long practices. MLP suggests that socio-technical transitions come about through alignments of trajectories and ongoing processes within and between these three analytical levels: (a) niche innovations gradually build up internal momentum, (b) changes at landscape level create pressure on the regime, (c) destabilisation which aligns with ongoing regime procedures leading to substantial transformation and disruption. Focusing on the above helps us to stay focused on the relevant literature for our discourse, eschewing perspectives that capture the various actors’ positions before the 2015 Paris Agreement and the subsequent adoption of a transition regime by the actors.

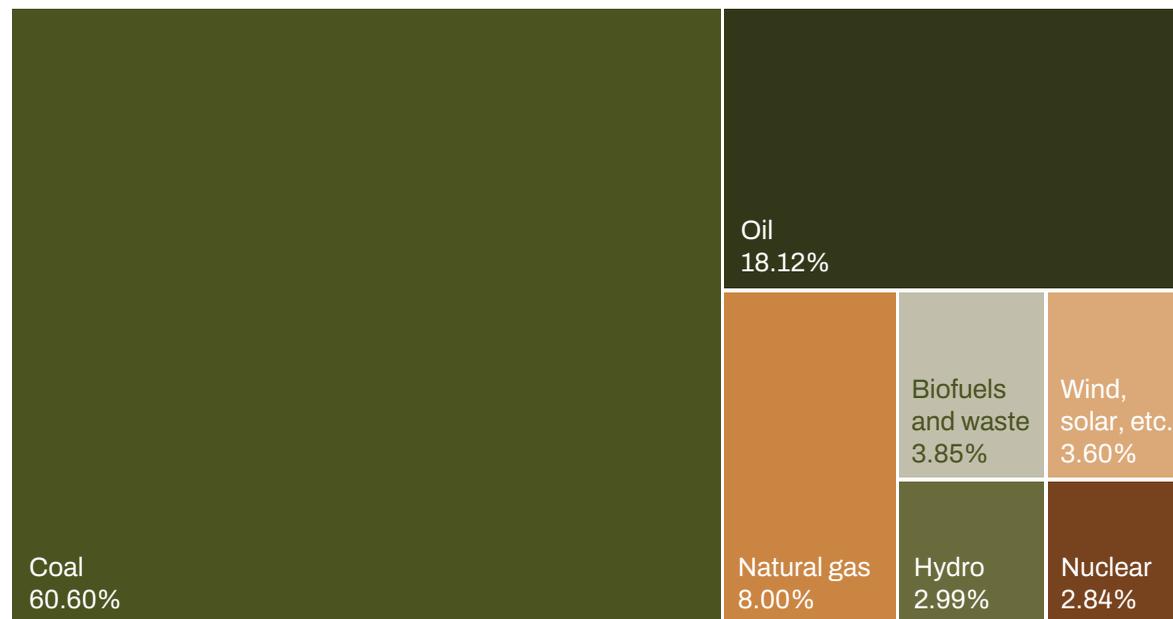
The objective of the review is to systematically identify, evaluate and synthesize existing research on China’s energy sustainability engagement with Nigeria and Hungary, with a focus on economic, social, environmental and geopolitical dimensions. The research topics are based on the key drivers of the energy plans of China, Nigeria and Hungary (RT0); China’s energy sustainability engagement in Hungary and Nigeria (RT1); the differences in the scope of China’s energy projects between Nigeria and Hungary (RT2); the socio-economic and environmental impacts of Chinese energy investments in Nigeria and Hungary (RT3); and the challenges and opportunities that exist in China’s long-term energy cooperation with Hungary and Nigeria (RT4). The literature criteria have the time frame 2000-2025; English and Hungarian language publications; geographically those

studies that focus on the abilities of China, Nigeria, Hungary and the EU, and China-Nigeria and China-Hungary, China-EU relations; the content comprises peer-reviewed articles, official and statistical reports, policy papers, government reports, institutional white papers, case studies related to energy sustainability, legal texts and analytical press materials.

3. China’s economic bilateral and multilateral relationship energy policy and transition plan

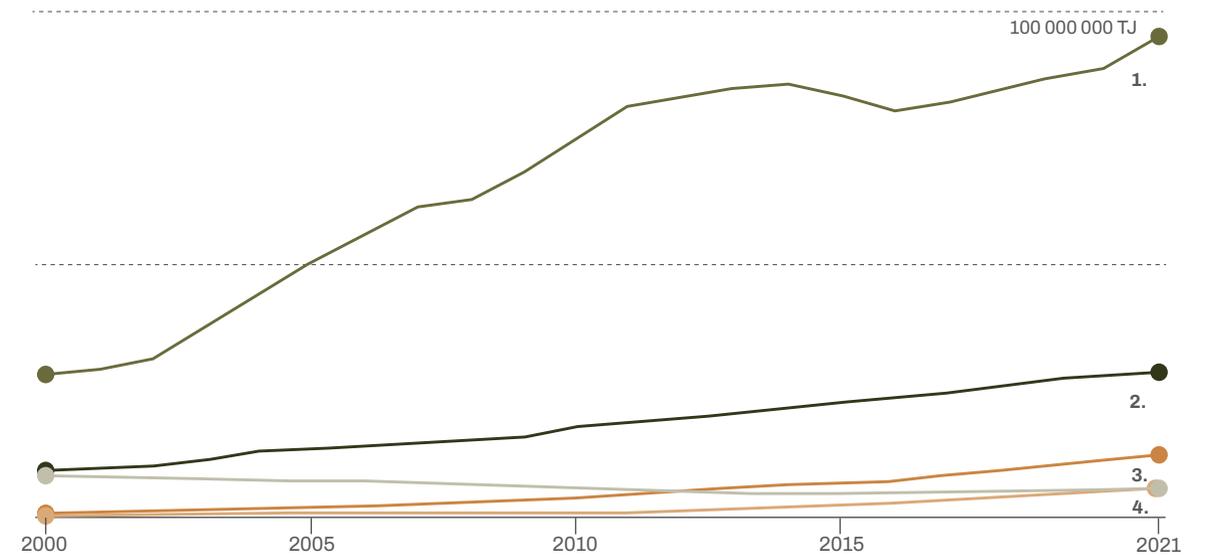
China’s seat as the workshop of the world has brought about growth for its rapidly growing population. Consolidating and improving on the gains of development makes for an insatiable, ever-increasing demand for energy. Therefore, it is simultaneously developing both brown energy and green energy (see Fig. 1. and 2.). The advancement of one is not at the expense of the other. We cannot therefore categorise China as being trapped in the carbon lock-in. A path-dependency process driven by technological and institutional increasing returns to scale (Unruh, 2000). China’s influence on global sustainability is established through the Chinese version of Xi’s initiative of the sustainable development “shengtai wenming” or “ecological civilization” constitutes systematised environmental imagery rooted in Chinese traditional cultural and social beliefs and perceptions of the human-nature relationship (Huang & Westman, 2021). China’s bilateral relations with countries concerning energy are dependent on the country’s energy policy outlook because Asia’s giant is open to trading both green and brown energy.

Figure 1. Total energy supply, China, 2021



Source: Adapted by the authors from data provided by the International Energy Agency (2024).

Figure 2. Evolution of total energy supply in China since 2000



Legend: 1. Coal; 2. Oil; 3. Natural gas; 4. Biofuels and waste

Source: Adapted by the authors from data provided by the International Energy Agency (2024).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been China’s avenue for the furtherance of its opening up to the world after the reform, required for interconnection and cooperation. Motivated by social, political and economic reasons. The construction of economic corridors calls for a country to strengthen its geo-economic and other relevant connections (Mengzi, 2019). The Belt and Road Initiative intends to open up a channel that goes through Asia, Europe and Africa, which is intended to link production areas with resource-rich areas and consumer market areas. A product of the result of the populous nation’s spillover effects on an oversized economy. Resulting oversized production capacity, which is bound to produce spillover effects, laid the basic conditions for Belt and Road construction. While some scholars see the Belt and Road Initiative as China’s leverage to eliminate excessive production capacity by transferring its oversized production, other scholars of international relations liberalists, constructivists, institutionalists and internationalists see China’s real intentions of the BRI and the Silk Road not as its dream for the community of a shared home together for the future of mankind, but the purported plan to dominate global politics and compete with the US (Wang, 2021; Lin, Shimazu & Sidaway, 2021). As part of that strategy, China is developing its multilateral and bilateral relations with the institutions and countries in all regions. China has notably become a member of all international organisations except the OECD, International Energy Agency and Missile Technology Control Regime (Kondapalli, 2020). China has developed institutional and multilateral alliances necessary for its reform and opening up to the globe, and has either created or stimulated the development of new organisations and regional groupings across the world.

The lack of trust in Western-style organisations and institutions scholars (Kundapalli, 2020; Cole, 2020; Brinza et al., 2024) enthused following the so-called “100 years of humiliation” that lasted

approximately from 1842 to 1949 when China saw its sovereignty violated by Western nations and Japan. This has influenced a strong sense of sovereignty and nationalism evident in China's engagement with these corporations. Regardless, China cushions its relevance on the international stage with bilateralism, which is why it engages in so many bilateral relationships, even in regions in a multilateral stronghold. Instrumental to its strategy of "push and shove" (Cole, 2020), a non-compromise stance that supports negotiation from every possible angle. Europe is strategic in China's economic expansion and its desire for global relevance. However, the role played by Europe in China's so-called slight, even though not all European nations were involved, still motivates an overly sensitive "carrot-and-stick" approach in dealing with perceived slights which Cole (2020) describes as "indicative of a weak insecure nation than one ranking second in the world both in economic and political power." We cannot discuss China's bilateral relationship with Hungary without first mentioning its dealings with European communities. This dates back to the days of the European Economic Community (EEC) and, nowadays, pushing expansions through the EU has been met with some pushback from the larger European Community's backlash against Chinese overexpansion in the EU, which affects citizens' well-being economically and politically. The non-reciprocity on the part of China with the unwillingness to yield substantial points in market access leads to unbalanced trade in EU trade relations, which has left a EUR 395 billion bilateral deficit (Le Corre, 2023; Brinza et al., 2024). With hope dashed of a more liberal opening up to European business compared to Chinese state and party control, increased nationalist tension between China and the West because of Beijing's stance on the war between Ukraine and Russia, Taiwan and issues with other Chinese neighbours, the EU is looking for long-term strategies to deal with China. De-risking is a recent approach yielded by the EU and Japan to cushion the security and geometric implications of their dependence on China (Zhou, Su & Yuan, 2024). De-risking was introduced by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, in January 2023, as an alternative to the "decoupling" policy adopted by the US towards China. Decoupling emphasises a large-scale reduction of economic dependencies on China, while also imposing trade barriers and sanctions to prevent China from emerging as a serious competitor, particularly in strategic technology sectors. In contrast, de-risking entails more balanced diplomatic and economic relations with China. With emphasis on an intention to continue to "work and trade with China", while mitigating threats that China may pose to "the EU's resilience, long-term prosperity and security". Needless to say, China is also working out its strategy, part of which is to have bilateral relationships with European countries within the EU regardless of bilateral dealings with the EU at the supranational level, so that it can shore up its strategies with individual member states irrespective of an existing bilateral relationship with the EU. Deficiencies within Europe than from a deliberate Chinese strategy to divide the continent for which China is presented with 28 "gateways to Europe". In return, China has been keen to re-package this argument and highlight the special nature of its relationship with individual European partners (Huotari et al., 2015). Using these gateways, Hungary is one of China's strongest member states within the EU, offering it a gateway into the EU regardless of the new policy push. Hungary joined the Belt and Road Initiative in 2015, though diplomatic relations with China have existed for around 75 years. The recent key projects for building global infrastructure and energy

networks connecting Asia with Africa and Europe, include, for example, the reconstruction of the Budapest (Hungary) - Belgrade (Serbia) railway, of which 85% was financed by a loan from China (Győri-Kömüves, 2024). Hungary is a gateway for Chinese EVs into Europe; hosting Chinese electric vehicle maker BYD and battery manufacturer CATL is ongoing in various places in the country.

China and Nigeria are both giants in their own rights. China is Asia's population and economic giant. China has designed a foreign policy to achieve economic domination; it is therefore in the race for the position of the most prosperous nation globally. Nigeria's economic woes (as the country with the highest population living below the poverty line globally), despite its position as the 7th largest crude oil producer globally, have robbed it of its place as the economic colossus of Africa; however, its growing population allows it to keep the status of a giant. Though the relationship between the two countries has continued to exist a decade since Nigeria gained independence from Britain, there have been inconsistencies in their bilateral and strategic relationships. This may not be unrelated to the several regime changes that have occurred in Nigeria; each new government sets its agenda for engagement with the Asian giant (Osimen & Micah, 2022). China's major interest is in Nigeria's energy and other mineral resources available in abundant commercial quantity, while Nigeria's population makes for an easy market for finished goods from China. Nigeria has been designated as its strategic partner in the African region, highlighting Nigeria's strategic role in the Belt and Road Initiative for the African region - Consul General for Nigeria (Xinhua News Agency, 2019). Scholars, however, bemoan that Nigeria benefits way less from the strategic relationship, with issues of trade imbalances and China's unwillingness to consolidate its projects in Nigeria through appropriate technology transfer (Osimen & Micah, 2022; Ocholi & Okonkwo, 2022; Xiang & Oluduro, 2023; Ibrahim, Sari & Handoyo, 2020). A look at the China-Nigeria Bilateral Investment Treaty signed in 2001 reveals a lack of essential environmental and social aspects, including sustainable development, corporate social responsibility, transparency and respect for the human rights of host communities, poverty alleviation, reference to a concern for the environment as it relates to plant or animal life, biodiversity or climate change; the treaty focuses more on oil and gas, which are of primary interest to China, revealing sustainable development deficit promotion in the China-Nigeria investment relations (Xiang & Oluduro, 2023; UN Trade and Development). This oversight is not unrelated to the seeming lack of prioritisation of this in both countries, which explains why China was one of the countries that had dealings with the Nigerian military government under Sani Abacha (former military ruler) while most countries in the West shunned the regime which was well known for its atrocities against citizens in contravention of the rule of law. Justification for this seems to be the entrenched treaty agreement in 1971 centred on non-interference.

4. Nigeria's energy policy and transition plan

The Voluntary National Reviews (VNR), a provision within the Sustainable Development Goals, creates a window for à la carte options for countries to take stock, pick and choose what aligns with their development reality for the 2030 Agenda. Nigeria's VNR for 2020 focused on issues of poverty (SDG 1), inclusive economy (SDG 8), health and well-being (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), and the enabling environment of peace and security (SDG 16) and partnerships (SDG 17) (VNR, 2020). The structure is based on the Economic Recovery Growth Plan (ERGP) 2017–2020, an initiative of the immediate past administration of Late President Muhammadu Buhari, for the restoration of economic growth, counting *on the ingenuity and resilience of Nigerians* – which are regarded as the nation's most priceless assets (ERGP, 2017). This statement on the statehouse website can be viewed from two perspectives: one, expressed by Yagboyaju and Akinola (2019), that the petroleum-rich Nigerian state confronted by sociopolitical instability, a high degree of corruption, mass hostility to the “public” and poor macroeconomic management continue to display the attributes of a state in crisis which cause successive governments to reenact the usual practice of getting citizens to adopt austerity measures while the elites in governance get jumbo pay to fund crises without recourse to economically challenging times. The second is the survival instinct of Nigerians, taking steps to find solutions to their everyday problems in the face of little or no help from the government. This motivates them to react innovatively to challenges that border on their survival. It is a rational sense-making attitude following the antecedents of government infrastructure and social neglect. Clearly, energy is not on the list above, despite the huge energy challenges bedeviling the country. For a population of over 232 million people, Nigeria generates only 12.5 GW of electricity, and has a distribution dilemma, which ensures that only 5.5 GW of this reaches the end users. An average of 90 million of the population have no access to the national grid for electricity supply (CNN, 2021). Those with access to the national grid only have power for an average of 8 to 10 hours a day. The other hours of electricity are self-supplied using gasoline or petrol generator sets. The volume of petrol purchased for this purpose is estimated at 14 billion dollars annually. At least 40% of Nigerian households own a generator. Despite having the largest crude oil reserve in Africa and the 11th in the world, Nigerians still suffer untold hardship in accessing gasoline and petrol, with evidence of long queues at gas stations on many occasions, to fuel vehicles and for home use. The Nigerian Energy Policy (NEP) (2022, p. 1) acknowledges that the efficient conversion of energy resources into useful energy is directly indicative of economic development. The NEP admits to a progressive deterioration without new capacity additions that cater to the increased population and urbanisation (Ogujiuba, Ehigiamusoe & Udefuna, 2013). With abundant energy resources from crude oil and natural gas, coal, tar sand and renewables, such as hydro, fuelwood, solar, wind and biomass. The Sustainable Development Trust Fund (SDTF) is recommended to address the lack of equitable resource development that matches the population growth rates (Ogujiuba, Ehigiamusoe & Udefuna, 2013). Historical factors influencing energy transitions, as captured by Edoma, Foulds and Jones (2016), would usually frame the energy infrastructures for a particular period. The accompanying chaos in Nigeria following the historical announcement by

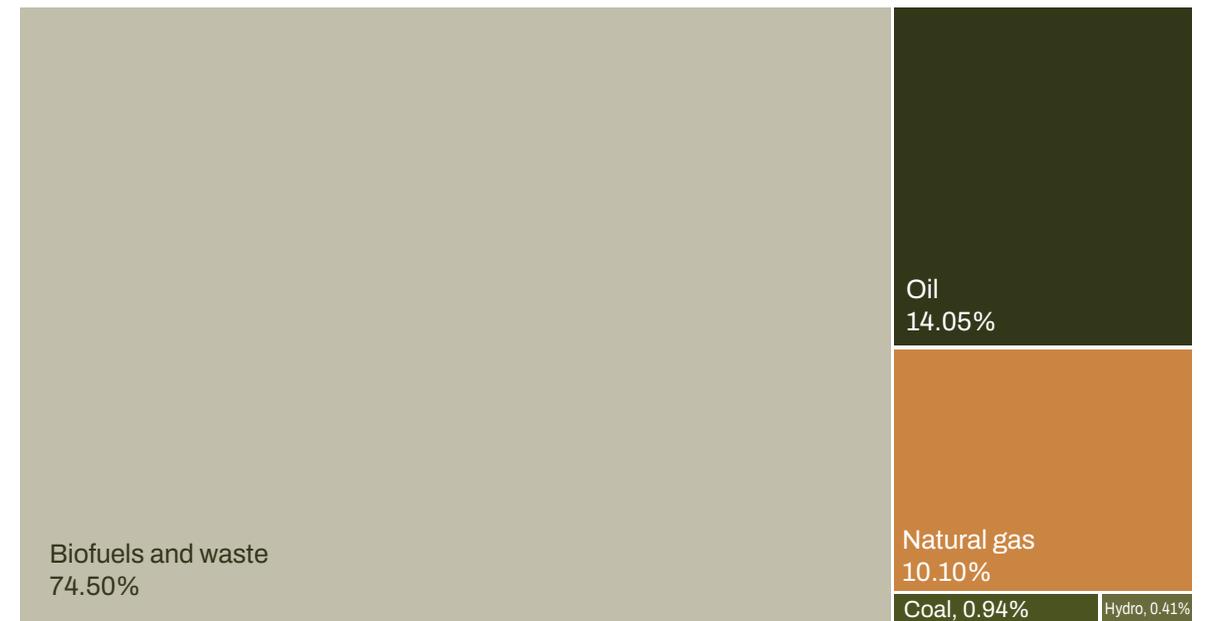
the incumbent administration of Bola Ahmed Tinubu that the petroleum product subsidies have been withdrawn by the federal government led to a more than 300% increase in petroleum products. This price hike is influencing new innovative developments in the energy sector. One key area in the energy sector that has suffered neglect over time, despite being available in huge quantities, is the natural gas sector. This is now the focus of supply for various energy needs in Nigeria. Natural gas has seen an increase in the areas of energy supply for cooking, for electricity supply to the home via conversion for use as energy for generator sets, as well as vehicular energy supply, also the conversion of vehicles to enable gas tanks to power vehicles.

The responsible agency for oversight on Nigeria's Energy Policy is the Energy Commission of Nigeria, enacted in 1979, with subsequent amendments in 1988 and 1989, which has the statutory mandate of strategic planning and coordination of national policies on energy in all its ramifications (Nigerian Energy Commission, 1979). This means responsibility for overseeing Nigeria's energy policy, plan and laws. The most recent document produced by the commission is the National Energy Master Plan, approved on 27 April 2022. According to the master plan, energy sources in Nigeria, both utilised and subject to planned utilisation, are petroleum resources (crude oil, natural gas and shale hydrocarbon), coal and tar sand/bitumen, nuclear energy, renewable energy resources (hydropower, solar and wind), bioenergy (biomass, fuelwood, biofuel). The situation of erratic, severely unreliable energy supply and inadequate coverage in terms of geographical spread across the country has been a recurring decimal, and it has therefore not been able to address increased electricity demand due to the population explosion; it increased to 60,000 GWh in 2020, compared to 1,273 GWh in 1970. The energy master plan report described this as suppressed demand, which means it would be more if the environment were enabling. This suppressed demand, however, is not met by the national grid due to inadequate supply; a whopping 80% of the energy supply comes from installed fossil fuel generators, both from industries and homes. The presidential Advisory Committee on Energy suggested an electricity generation mix of 2% nuclear, 7% hydro, 10% new renewables, 11% coal and 70% natural gas, with the intention of a 25-year energy development plan for a planned annual growth of 10% – 16,000 MW for 2010, 30,000 MW by 2015 and 192,000 MW by 2030. Additionally, Nigeria's Energy Transition Plan sets bold targets for electric vehicle adoption. It projects that 60% of the market share of vehicles in Nigeria will be electric in 2050, and 100% by 2060. This plan also includes strategies to shift from passenger cars to public transportation and two- or three-wheelers, further reducing emissions. This National Action Plan for the Development of Electric Vehicles (EVDP) puts an emphasis on local production, aiming for at least 30% domestically produced EVs by 2032. This initiative seeks to stimulate the economy, reduce reliance on imported vehicles and encourage investments through financial incentives such as reduced import duties and tax breaks. Local vehicle manufacturers, like Innoson Vehicle Manufacturing Company, which launched its first electric car models in 2024, and JET Motor Company, operational since 2021, have focused on producing electric buses to cater to urban transit demands, while international brands like Voyah from China have gained popularity for their affordability and cutting-edge features (Johnson, 2025).

While all of these plans look promising for Nigeria’s energy future, this statement, credited to the International Renewable Energy Agency IRENA, (2023) *that the Nigerian government has a long history of developing sound policies, but has faced challenges in establishing implementation mechanisms.* There is the challenge of multiple agencies working on the renewable energy future of Nigeria, such as the Rural Electrification Agency, National Atomic Energy Commission and the Federal Ministry of Environment, leading to the creation of an interministerial committee to allow for coordination. The national Energy Transition Plan (ETP), launched in 2021 and updated in 2024, targets net zero by 2060 and includes a goal of 30,000 MW of renewable energy. Key supporting elements include the Electricity Act of 2023, enabling subnational control over market evolution, the national Renewable Energy Master Plan (REMP) and efforts to foster local manufacturing of renewable energy technologies like solar panels and inverters to support the ETP’s goals. The Inter-Ministerial Committee on Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency (ICREEE) aims to attract the necessary investment by providing a framework for sector-wide coherence and stakeholder engagement.

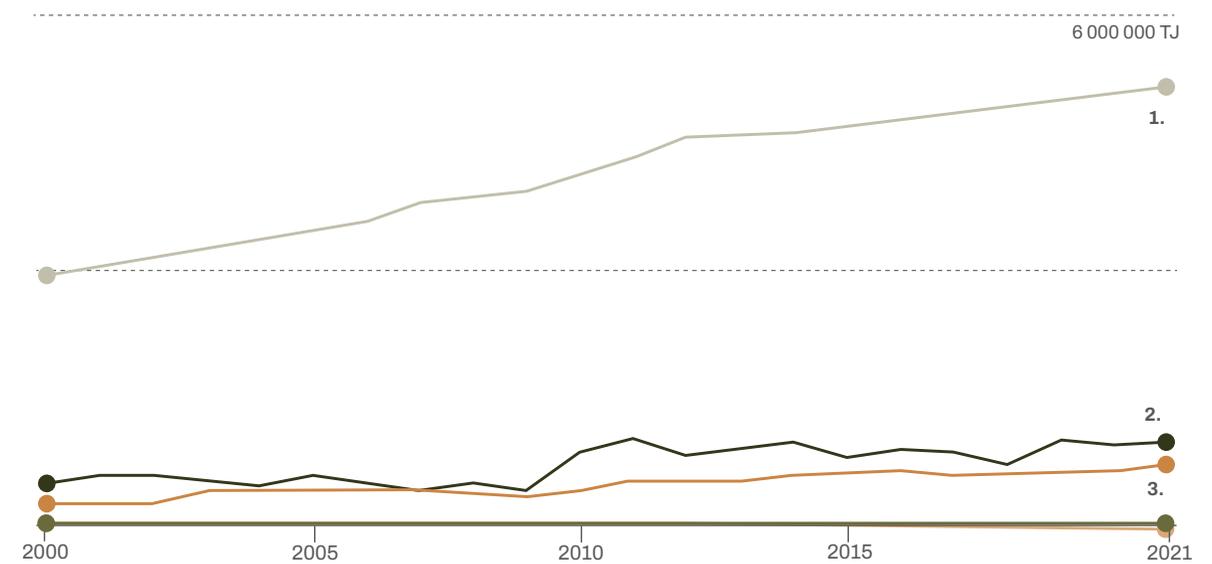
A collaboration between the International Renewable Energy Agency and the Energy Commission of Nigeria produced the Renewable Energy Roadmap for Nigeria (REMap) to offer a long-term perspective to 2050, with options for scaling up sustainable energy supply to reach its SDGs. The REMap identified four major renewable energy sources in Nigeria: solar, hydro, wind and biomass. These are all underexploited. Solar power is highly significant, approximately 88.7 GW, making it a potential producer of green hydrogen both for domestic consumption and export (Nguyen, 2024). This is mostly densely located in the northern part of Nigeria (Ogunmodimu, 2013). Nigeria has average wind speeds at 10 metres (m) high ranging between 2.1 m/second and 8 m/sec with the highest values (greater than 7 m/sec), moderate wind potential, located in the northern part of the country. IRENA estimates the technical potential for wind at 3.2 GW, considering only 1% of suitable land can be utilised for project development (IRENA & AfDB, 2022). This wind and solar power concentration in the north adequately compensates the south, in which much of the country’s oil and gas is concentrated. Large hydro potential for Nigeria is 24 GW, with small potential at 3.5 GW. Nigeria had about 1.9 GW installed capacity for large hydro and about 60 megawatts of small hydro (IHA, 2021). Nigeria has huge potential for biomass, which can improve access to clean cooking energy; the National Bureau of Statistics put access at 18% in 2020. In the same year, reports from international bodies IEA, IRENA, UNSD, World Bank and WHO put it at 13% (IRENA, 2023). The revolutionising of the energy sector will most probably be driven by stakeholders. For example, the Renewable Energy Association of Nigeria (REAN) whose vision is to promote strategies that will improve the contribution of renewable energy by up to forty per cent (40%) of the national energy mix by 2030. Focusing on the percentage of the population that has no access to the national grid and the number of persons suffering from erratic supply, it is a huge market opportunity for their members who are at various stages of developing renewable energy, more so for government incentives in the form of tax reductions and rebates, and access to interest-free loans and public orientation and incentivisation to patronise renewable energy.

Figure 3. Total energy supply, Nigeria, 2021



Source: Adapted by the authors from data provided by the International Energy Agency (2024).

Figure 4. Evolution of total energy supply in Nigeria since 2000

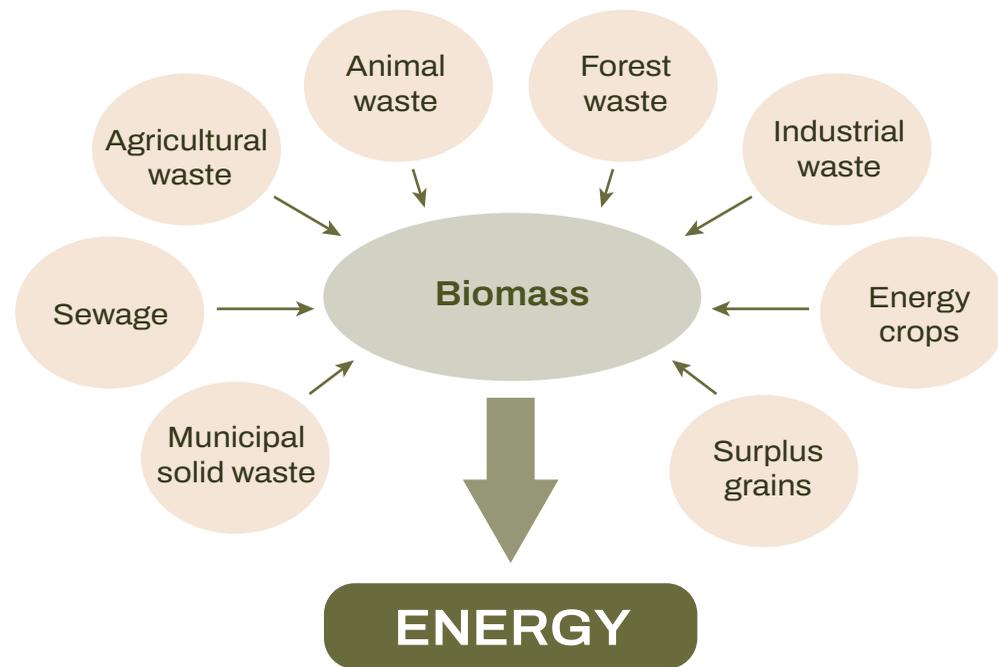


Legend: 1. Biofuels and waste; 2. Oil; 3. Natural gas

Source: Adapted by the authors from data provided by the International Energy Agency (2024).

The need to diversify its energy needs and obtain more sustainable energy-efficient sourcing prompted the Nigerian government, in August 2005, to join other counterpart countries in the development of biofuel sector policy. This followed the mandating of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) directive for an automotive biomass programme for the nation to reduce the dependence on imported gasoline and fossil fuel pollutants. The main focus is the integration of the agricultural sector with the economy’s downstream petroleum sector and attracting some foreign direct investment here (Edeh & Okpo, 2023; Adeleke et al., 2023). This seems like a well-documented plan for implementing a biomass revolution in Nigeria; first, an importation phase that will blend biofuels with gasoline leading to E-10 (a 10% dilution of biofuel with gasoline), next the production phase expected to achieve 100% domestication by 2020. This followed the designation of proposed plants in various geopolitical zones in Nigeria with cassava and sugarcane as the primary raw materials for bioethanol. Others are maize, sorghum, sweet sorghum, millet, potatoes and sweet potatoes. Others are biomass from waste such as human and animal waste. Budgeted take-off funds and the production capacity of each of the locations are well-documented; however, the release of the funds and production are vague, including the EUR 70,000 feasibility study grant for the establishment of plants at target locations from the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership (REEEP) from Germany (Edeh & Okpo, 2023). Food insecurities in Nigeria may be the major challenge to ethanol biofuel energy production, while the diagram below (Fig. 5.) shows excess grains and food waste as the sources of raw material for biofuel. Bioethanol plants are known to source their products directly from farmers, which can have dire consequences for food security in Nigeria. Unless proper

Figure 5. Biomass waste to energy



Source: Edited by the authors, based on Adeleke et al. (2023).

agricultural food production coordination is achieved to ensure the excess that can cater to the biofuel industry, food supply challenges are inevitable.

Be it coal in Nigeria with proven reserves of 379 m tons according to the Ministry of Solid Minerals Development, making it the 44th proven reserve in the world, or crude oil reserves of 37.50 billion barrels or liquefied gas and now biomass resources with estimates between 47.97 to 49 million metric tons of oil equivalent (Adeleke et al., 2023), Nigeria has not harnessed or managed the naturally endowed energy resources for the benefit of its population. Aside from the environmental concerns related to energy generation and consumption, sustainable locally dependent energy resources are key to economic growth. The co-benefit theory of sustainability cooperations portends the need for energy infrastructure that drives the economy to create new jobs and wealth, which is what investment in biomass will mean for Nigeria. The lack of a comprehensive implementation strategy, according to IRENA (2023), for energy efficiency for its population means there may be no well-coordinated negotiation of bilateral energy agreements with partners. Negotiations should include monitoring processes that ensure compliance with the agreements.

IRENA recommends the following actions for renewable energy growth:

- Improve the existing financing mechanisms and explore further regulatory options.
- Improve and expand the regulatory framework for decentralised renewable energy solutions.
- Accelerate the electrification of end uses and promote policies that would support it.
- Modernise the transmission and distribution infrastructure.
- Invest in renewable energy over fossil energy.
- Develop a robust database for renewable energy potential and a corresponding pipeline

of bankable projects.

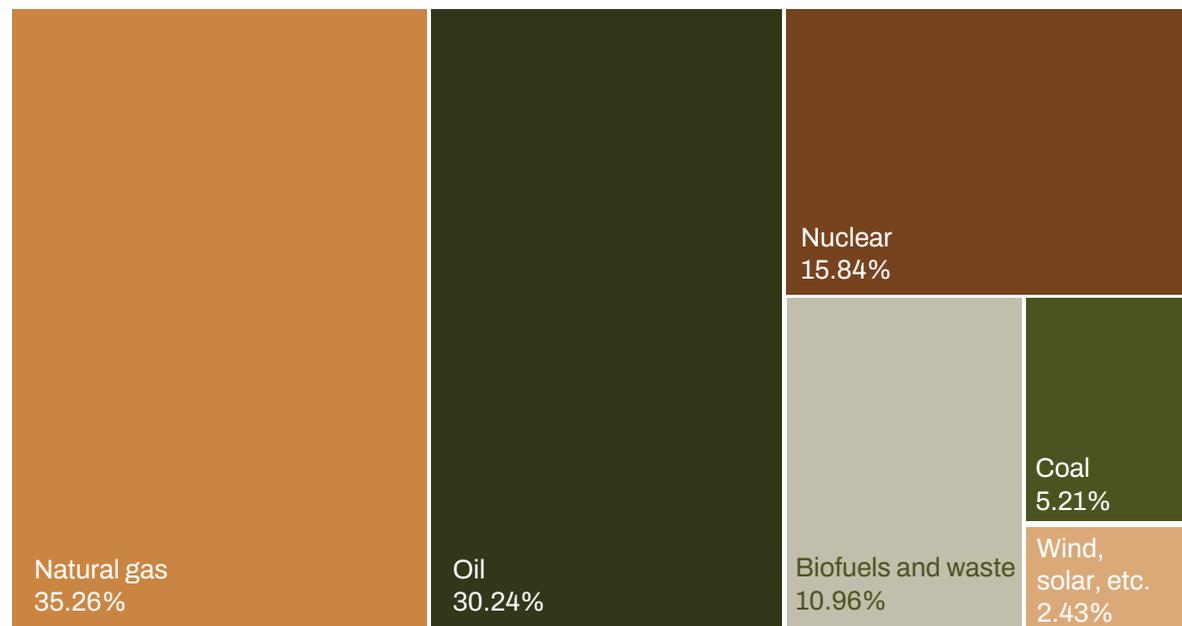
5. Hungary’s energy policy and transition plan

Hungary presented its VNR for the first time in 2018, concerning the global indicators for the SDGs. Approximately 75% were available at the time of its presentation (VNR 2018, p. 9). The VNR’s main environmental goals are combatting climate change (SDG 13), increasing biodiversity (SDG 15), protecting renewable natural resources and ensuring the responsible management of non-renewable resources (SDGs 7 and 12). This was reflected at the Budapest Water Summits in 2013 and 2016, emphasising the crucial role of “clean water and sanitation for all” (SDG 6) as an environmental pillar at the centre of the concept of sustainability. The goal of ensuring access to sustainable, safe and affordable energy (SDG 7) was adopted even earlier, in 2012, by the National Energy Strategy 2030, so the share of renewable energy sources in gross final energy consumption increased rapidly from 2017 to reach 12.6% in 2019 and 13.9% at the end of 2020, exceeding the 13% target (VNR 2018, p. 30). However, it was still

below and among the lowest shares within the EU (15.3%) in 2022 (Eurostat, 2024)³, which should reach at least 21% by 2030 in the case of Hungary. Meanwhile, an annual growth rate of 1.92% is expected in energy consumption between 2026-2040, explained by two main factors (NES 2040, 2020, p. 27): on the one hand, with the expansion of GDP, the industrial production also increases, with a significant impact on the electricity quantity used. On the other hand, the fastest pace of change is expected in the transport sector, with the spread of e-cars, but the railway also involves energy consumption. One opposing effect is identified in the residential and service sector, which is the prevalence of household appliances that increase electricity consumption; at the same time, we also experience a different effect through more energy-efficient equipment.

Based on the National Energy Strategy 2030 (NES), there are crucial efforts in Hungary to increase energy savings and efficiency in general and the share of renewable energies, to integrate and construct the Central European grid network, to maintain the existing nuclear capacities and lastly to utilise the domestic coal and lignite resources in an eco-friendly manner (NES 2012, p. 7). These priorities were published in 2012 when the “Nuclear-Coal-Green” scenario represented the realistic objective to be implemented. The import-export balance of electricity currently accounts for 12-16% of total domestic consumption (depending on sessional changes), but the Hungarian energy mix heavily relies on oil and natural gas (32-32% in 2020; IEA, 2024). Meanwhile, the national fossil fuel resources are insufficient (e.g. 80% of natural gas is imported) (see Fig. 6. and 7.).

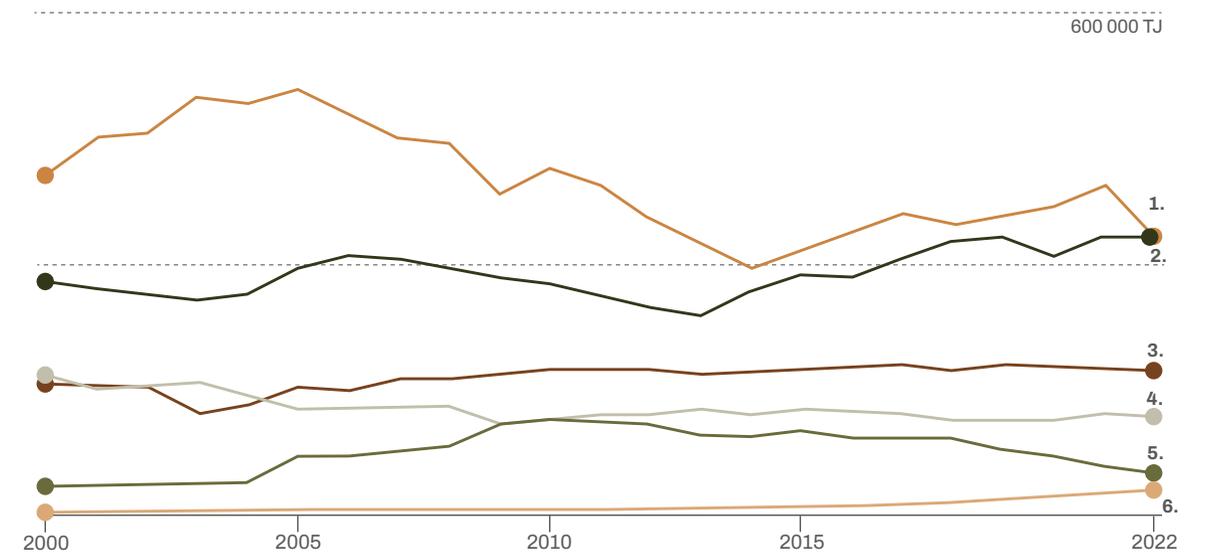
Figure 6. Total energy supply, Hungary 2021



Source: Adapted by the authors from data provided by the International Energy Agency (2024).

³ The EU average in the share of renewable sources in gross electricity consumption was 41% in 2022.

Figure 7. Evolution of total energy supply in Hungary since 2000



1. Natural gas; 2. Oil; 3. Nuclear; 4. Biofuels and waste; 5. Coal; 6. Wind, solar, etc.

Source: Adapted by the authors from data provided by the International Energy Agency (2024).

Since 2010, structural changes have been ongoing in the Hungarian energy policy. The increase in climate awareness, the economic impact of COVID-19 and the energy crises due to the Russo-Ukrainian war (2014-ongoing) drew even more attention to energy poverty. Compared to other EU countries and the EU average, Hungary has been slower and has added less low-carbon capacity in recent decades. Miklós (2019) espoused the slowing down of the renewable energy process in Hungary, and he reasoned with the “nuclear regime” between 2000-2015. The term is used to refer to the alliance between the government and supporters of the incumbent technology that prefers the centrally planned expansion of nuclear capacity and protects its interest utilising policy means, of which discursive strategies have typically been observed in niche-regime interactions (Smink et al., 2015), that was able to stabilise as the illiberal political turn has amplified several previously existing tendencies, such as confrontations, less transparency and exclusivity. After a period of uncertainty in relation to nuclear energy (e.g. because of the Fukushima disaster in 2011), in 2014 a contract with Russian Rosatom was announced (nuclear power plant (NPP) of 2 × 1,200 MW for EUR 12.5 billion), expected to build “Paks II” until the mid-2020s and to run for 60 years; despite that, its business case was questionable.

The seriousness of energy governance as an important political-economic issue is also captured in the communication point on “overhead/utility cost reduction”. This is a buzzword that the Fidesz-KDNP majority government introduced into Hungarian public discourse in 2013. In practice, on the residential end-consumer side, it meant a transition to official prices instead of free-price tariffs due to state intervention. The measure was helped by the extremely low global market price of fossil energy carriers at the time. To encourage the growth of the economy, to ensure the accessibility of

services and prices affordable to a large group of consumers (NES 2030, 2012, p. 11), the overhead/utility cost reduction programme became a cornerstone in the Hungarian elections in 2014.

Another intervention to reduce energy expenditure on household income is the enhancement of the energy efficiency of residential buildings (Weiner-Szép, 2022). Buildings are among the largest energy consumers and therefore carbon-dioxide emitters. Household energy consumption accounts for a third and almost half of gas consumption (mainly for heating) (NES 2030/2040, 2020, p. 15). In 2021, the government adopted the “Long-term Renovation Strategy”, including the renovation of domestic residential and non-residential buildings until 2050. 2.6 million residential properties (57% of Hungarian homes) require some level of energy modernisation (Domokos, 2024). An example of this is the “Home Renovation Programme” from July 2024, a grant for residential energy efficiency upgrades for houses built before 1990, funded by the European Union with USD 2.9 billion.

In 2021, 69.2% of renewable energy was used for heating and cooling, 20.2% for electricity production and 10.6% for transportation (NECP 2023, p. 9). As the data shows, Hungary’s renewable energy utilisation opportunities are still primarily spent in the heating sector (mainly through biomass usage by households). The actual use of solid biomass (firewood), which forms the major part of renewable energy use, largely depends on the price of other energy carriers, their consumption and the actual weather conditions. A strong substitute effect can be observed between natural gas and firewood in residential use, not to mention the effects of state intervention. In 2022, due to the increased energy prices (as a result of sanctions for the Russian invasion of Ukraine), the Hungarian government introduced the official price programme for firewood to maintain its overhead/utility cost reduction system. Hungary’s energy strategy is summarised in a single sentence: “our purpose is to seek ways out of our energy dependency” (NES 2030, 2012, p. 11). While renewables and nuclear plant capabilities are long-term ambitions, the dependence on natural gas and oil remained significant for Hungary: both are imported and have Russia as the predominant supplier (Fershtey 2020, p. 46). Fact sheets on the State of the Union 2017 estimated Hungary’s energy case as: 95% of natural gas imports supplied by Russia, and 81.1% of crude oil and natural gas liquids (NGL) too. In the nuclear energy field, the report argues that the fuel is supplied solely by Russia. “The violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity by acts of aggression by the Russian armed forces in March 2014” (Foreign Affairs Council, 2014) had deepening consequences for bilateral relations between the EU and Russia, caused the ongoing EU sanctions against Russia – and navigated Hungary into a delicate situation in terms of energy supply, as well.

On the other hand, coal consumption fell by half, and the use of solar energy exceeded the amount of electricity produced from coal by 2021 (solar cells increased from 3.3% to 12.8% within renewable energies between 2010 and 2020) (Szabó, 2022; Bozsik-Szeberényi-Bozsik, 2023). Nevertheless, lignite and coal resources (of 10.5 billion tons in 2018; lignite 54%, brown stone 30%, black stone 16%) are still strategic reserves of the Hungarian energy industry. The maintenance of coal-based energy generation is a global trend (see the increase in the coal level in China, Fig. 2.), given that in energy crises it is a readily available internal reserve, as well as preventing the ultimate loss of a valuable trade culture and maintaining the possibility of future, greener utilisation (NES 2030,

2012, p. 12). The “Mátrai Erőmű”, the only large coal-fired power plant in Hungary, the country’s second-largest electricity producer, with 15% of domestic electricity production, is also a significant player in the labour market. A regional employer, where a large part of the population directly or indirectly works (2,000 jobs directly, 10,000 indirectly). At the same time, it is the largest emitter of carbon dioxide in Hungary, which is almost 50% of the energy production sector’s total CO₂ emissions, and accounts for 14% of total domestic CO₂ emissions. The power plant and the local 100,000 households heating with lignite also significantly contribute to the concentration of other air pollutants (SO₂, Hg, NO₂) (NES 2040, 2020, p. 25). However, one of the most important decarbonisation targets is the transformation of “Mátrai Erőmű” into a new power plant based on lower carbon dioxide emission technologies, no later than 2030.

6. Bilateral relations between Nigeria and China concerning energy transition and the co-benefit impetus for cooperation on sustainability

Xiang and Oludoro (2023) contend that the current China-Nigeria Bilateral Investment Treaty lacks essential environmental and social aspects, including sustainable development, corporate social responsibility, transparency and respect for the human rights of host communities, for the promotion of better China-Nigeria investment relations. Energy trade (oil and gas) lies at the core of the diplomatic relationship between China and Nigeria. Between 2000 and 2022, oil and gas products accounted for about 75% of Nigeria’s total exports to China, representing a significant portion of China’s oil imports from Africa, its largest source of oil after the Middle East and Russia. From 2006, during the Obasanjo administration (Nigeria’s civilian president after many years of military rule) payments for infrastructure development were tied to oil acquisitions by the China National Offshore Oil Company, which gained the first right of refusal on four oil blocs, oil for infrastructure (Chen, 2018). Instances of this nature are why the African Development Bank asserts the inevitability of a trade imbalance between Africa and China. China is most interested in Nigeria, as one of the raw material-rich countries (crude oil), as a source of energy and raw materials for its manufacturing. Nigeria, due to its huge population, is one of China’s targets for manufactured goods. Ayoola (2013) presents Nigeria as showing high CO₂ emissions despite its low economic growth and increased use of clean energy. By contrast, China’s investments in clean energy have started paying off, showing reductions in CO₂ emissions. Li, Zakri and Tawaih (2020), Xiang and Oludoro (2023) added their voice to the unbalanced, asymmetrical bilateral relations between China and Nigeria making it difficult for the Nigerian government to address both the country’s problems and its national debt to China. They emphasised the need for an overhaul of the trade policy between Nigeria and China, which will not only advance the country’s technological capabilities but also strengthen its negotiating position to achieve greater benefits in its economic relations with China. The Nigerian government must, above all, uphold its foreign trade policy in all future interactions with China. Situation as being claimed by China but rather a win-lose situation as reality shows.

While China’s economy is heavily diversified with the capacity built up to export varieties of produce, Nigeria is still over-dependent on oil as the commanding height of its economy (Agubamah, 2014).

Other areas of cooperation in the energy sector include the USD 1.3 billion Zungeru dam on the Kaduna River, a tributary of Niger. The companies handling the project are two Chinese companies: SynoHydro and China National Electric Engineering Company. It is expected to generate 700 MW of electricity, funded by loans from China’s Exim Bank (BPE). Also being constructed by a Chinese company, China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC), is the 3,050 MW Mambilla hydroelectric plant. An MOU between Nigeria and China’s principal surveyor of wind energy. In the areas of green energy, solar, wind, hydro, energy efficiency and management, there is the exchange of knowledge and equipment with some universities of technology in the country. Solar panel equipment was donated by the Department of Commerce of Yunnan Province and Kunming Engineering Corporation Limited of China.

The table below summarises the key trends, sectors and characteristics of Chinese investments in Nigeria from 2000 to 2025, based on available research. This literature highlights sectoral focus, investment mechanisms and notable impacts.

| Table 2. Chinese investments in Nigeria (2000–2025) | | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|--|
| Period | Key sectors | Investment mechanisms | Key trends/impacts | Citations |
| 2000–2010 | oil and gas, construction | FDI, bilateral agreements | focus on extractive industries, infrastructure and special economic zones | Oyeranti et al., 2011; Adunbi & Stein, 2019; Nyiayaana & Jack, 2021 |
| 2011–2015 | manufacturing, energy | FDI, PPPs, joint ventures | growth in manufacturing FDI, technology transfer attempts, energy sector expansion | Chen, 2021; Chen et al., 2016; Xiang & Oluduro, 2023; Wieland, 2023 |
| 2016–2020 | infrastructure, telecom, power | FDI, loans, PPPs | major infrastructure projects (roads, railways), telecom growth, increased debt | Adeleke et al., 2023; Bukar & Arabaci, 2023; Akinshipe et al., 2024; Eyitope, 2020 |
| 2021–2025* | manufacturing, agriculture, energy | FDI, PPPs, bilateral treaties | continued infrastructure focus, mixed technology transfer, governance challenges | Rindap et al., 2024; Akinwale & Dekpo-Adzab, 2024; Imanche et al., 2021; Wieland, 2023 |

*2021–2025 projections are based on recent trends and qualitative analysis, as full data for this period is not yet available.

Source: The papers were sourced and synthesized using Consensus, an AI-powered research search engine, and the results were subsequently verified by the authors (2025).

Chinese FDI has played a significant role in shaping Nigeria’s industrial policies, driving sectoral focus, technology transfer and policy adaptation. While positive impacts are evident, improving benefits requires stronger local linkages, governance and strategic policy implementation.

7. Hungary’s bilateral relations with China concerning energy transition and the co-benefit impetus for cooperation on sustainability

In the last thirty decades, Central and Eastern Europe – comprising the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia – has attracted foreign direct investment in greenfield developments and with some dynamic growth of the automotive industry (Molnár, 2012). The lower wage costs, the traditions of mechanical engineering, the infrastructure related to the former industrial centres and the emerging system of state subsidies favoured the region (Rechnitzer-Smahó, 2012, p. 8; Molnár, 2012, p. 124). Due to this, the automotive product turnover of the Central and Eastern European region was already showing a foreign trade surplus at the turn of the Millennium, where the bigger Western European countries, mostly Germany, Italy and France, also played a role as consumer markets for the “quasi-integrated” automotive players producing for the European market (Molnár, 2012, p. 130). To build direct connections, suppliers also moved closer to car factories and assembly plants; these concentrations within the supplier network increased innovation potential too (Rechnitzer-Smahó, 2012, p. 9).

It is therefore not surprising that the automotive industry is the leading sector of the Hungarian economy, the most serious industrial sector since 2011, with about 27.6% based on the distribution of production value, which is about 5-6% of the total domestic GDP, and the supplier background is another 8-9%. Car exports account for about a quarter of the country’s exports (HCSO, 2019).

Among domestic car makers, Suzuki in Komárom essentially intends to launch e-car production in India from 2025. Opel in Szentgotthárd has continued only conventional engine and transmission production operations; battery production will be housed in Kaiserslautern from 2025. Audi launched its “E-Transformation” project in Győr in 2019, with the e-tron electric motor starting a year earlier. The debut of Hungary’s first purely electric, mass-produced car, the new Mercedes EQB SUV model, was introduced in the autumn of 2021 in Kecskemét. The production of purely electric cars at the BMW plant in Debrecen begins in 2025. In parallel, new players have emerged in the global automotive industry: the rapidly internationalising large companies from developing countries.

The Chinese Build Your Dreams (BYD) electric buses have been in production since 2017 in Komárom. In 2019, the Ikarus City Pioneer e-bus manufactured in Székesfehérvár was launched by Electrobus Europe, a joint venture between the Hungarian company Ikarus and Chinese firm CRRC Urban Traffic. South Korea’s Samsung SDI announced in August 2016 the company’s Göd plant as the location for its European battery production. SK Innovation, from Korea, in November 2019, announced that it would establish a plant producing lithium batteries for electric vehicles in Komárom. By 2019, Korea’s Shinheung SEC had completed the construction of its plant in Monor, where it makes battery components. Doosan, a Korean company, began production of copper foils for battery factories in 2020. Japanese GS Yuasa built its first plant on the European continent in Miskolc for the production of lithium-ion batteries.

The world’s largest battery manufacturing company, China’s CATL, announced in 2022 plans to build its second European battery factory in Debrecen to serve the needs of the European market. One year later (2023), Chinese company Sunwoda established its first European battery plant in Nyíregyháza. In 2023, Chinese car manufacturer BYD began building its first European electric car factory in Szeged.

The above timeline shows the progressive industrialisation processes of car manufacturing (throughout Central and Eastern Europe), which took place within the framework of the market economy model, leading to easily adaptable competitive advantages, technology transfers, modern management practices and global market embeddedness, built on favourable capital financing and a low or medium value-added division of labour. The financial crisis in 2008 eroded these cost benefits. Skilled labour has become critical due to path-dependent evolution, and a combination of location-specific factors is becoming increasingly important (Lux, 2017; Molnár et al., 2021). Among these attributes, in a post-COVID-19 era and current war period, the current geopolitical situation is becoming particularly significant. Niche-regime interactions remained in Hungary since 2014, but as relations with the West loosened up, bilateral relations with China became tighter. The regime maintained its routine behaviour, rearranged the alliances and transformed into an “e-battery manufacturer regime”: the world’s fourth largest battery manufacturer in 2024.

China has been the largest foreign investor in Hungary since 2020, with 58% of Hungary’s total foreign direct investment (FDI) (Xiao, 2024). According to the China Economic Information Service (CEIS), bilateral trade reached USD 14.52 billion in 2023, with a 73% increase in a 10-year horizon. Hungary, as a critical node in the European automotive industry and supply chain, became an ideal place for Chinese companies: the geographical position, the transportation network, the political and business environment, etc. provide a strategic position to meet the demands of the European market. This also generates a delicate situation for Hungary in the ongoing EU-China trade war, as the EU has imposed punitive tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles, with unfair subsidies as the reason (Nielsen, 2024, p. 1). Experts estimate the BYD company, alone, to have received more than USD 25 billion over three years (Bickenbach et al., 2024). Besides the EV sector, other green technologies also come into the picture of unfair subsidies and price dumping. Europe imports 95% of its solar panels, mostly from China, as a result of subsidised competition from the US and China that has effectively displaced domestic solar panel manufacturers. Europe accounted for more than 50 per cent of China’s total photovoltaic (PV) exports in 2022, making it China’s largest overseas PV market (Yeping, 2023). Even so, the EU is unlikely to act because PV imports are necessary for the green energy transition.

Hungary also calculates a total 12 GW of solar panel capacity by 2030. The upcoming largest solar energy storage facility is currently under construction near Szolnok, with Chinese company Huawei. But there are other solar projects already underway as well under the Belt and Road Initiative in Hungary, initiated by China, for example in Kaposvár since 2021. And the following are expected to be the Chinese battery and electric car factories. Factories located in large areas are particularly suitable for installing solar power plants to cover their own energy needs: partially, and especially not

continuously. But through this they would contribute to the reduction of market prices, and, actually, this is the primary consideration.

While the developments in the 2020s are in line with the country’s industrial and energy policy goals and commitment to green technology, they have also sparked significant environmental debate and social opposition. The CATL project in Debrecen has faced ongoing resistance from residents, particularly in the village of Mikepércs, since 2022 (HL, 2022). At the centre of the debate is the factories’ intensive water consumption in an area already affected by climate-induced aridity, as well as risks of chemical contamination, soil degradation, noise and air pollution. In Ivánca, plans for a battery module destruction and testing facility, next to the existing SK On plant, also raised concerns among locals in 2023, particularly regarding noise, air pollution and inadequate disaster management protocols (Bodnár, 2023). Samsung’s battery plant in Göd has been the subject of repeated environmental disputes as well. In 2024, protests intensified following revelations that the factory continued operations despite a judicial order suspending its environmental usage permit (Fazekas, 2024). These discussions highlight the need for stronger environmental safeguards, participatory decision-making frameworks and consistency with EU environmental standards, including the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (1998).

The table below summarises the main trends, sectors and characteristics of Chinese investments in Hungary from 2000 to 2025, based on available research. This literature highlights sectoral focus, investment mechanisms and notable impacts.

| Period | Key sectors | Investment mechanisms | Key trends/impacts | Citations |
|------------|--|-----------------------------|---|---|
| 2000–2010 | automotive, electronics, manufacturing | greenfield, acquisitions | early investments focused on market access and EU entry; Huawei established major operations | Völgyi & Lukács, 2021; Vikor, 2019; Szunomár & McCaleb, 2017 |
| 2011–2015 | chemicals, ICT, services | acquisitions, greenfield | major acquisition: Wanhua’s purchase of BorsodChem; expansion in ICT and service sectors | Völgyi & Lukács, 2021; Kuttor, 2022; Weilong, 2017; Nyiri & Xu, 2017 |
| 2016–2020 | infrastructure, manufacturing | FDI, PPPs, loans | large-scale infrastructure projects, Belgrade-Budapest railway; Hungary becomes top CEE destination for Chinese FDI | Rogers, 2019; Völgyi & Lukács, 2021; Vikor, 2019; Jacoby & Korkut, 2016 |
| 2021–2025* | batteries, green energy, education | greenfield, strategic deals | CATL battery giga factory, green energy, Fudan University campus plans (failed); 18 new agreements in 2024 | Wu, 2024; Vida & Bognár, 2024; Wang, 2023; Völgyi & Lukács, 2021 |

*2021–2025 projections are based on recent trends and qualitative analysis, as full data for this period is not yet available.

Source: The papers were sourced and synthesized using Consensus, an AI-powered research search engine, and the results were subsequently verified by the authors (2025).

Chinese FDI has played a pivotal role in shaping Hungary's industrial policies, driving sectoral renewal and reinforcing an FDI-led growth model. Policy incentives, strategic agreements and sectoral targeting reflect a clear alignment with Chinese investment priorities, though this has also increased Hungary's economic exposure and dependency.

8. Analysis

Hungary's energy strategy statement, which is "*to seek ways out of energy dependence*" (NES 2030, 2012 p. 11), is also the justifiable co-benefit impetus for the EU's drive towards more sustainable energy sources. The fact that much of its energy supply comes from outside the European Union, with gas predominantly coming from Russia, echoes the need for local energy sources. The Russian aggression and invasion of Ukraine is renewed proof that energy is a political and economic tool for which the EU believes that less patronage for Russian gas from the EU is less financing of Russian aggression in the region. Alliances are driven by a well-thought-out co-benefit impetus for the economic development and in the interests of the parties involved. Scholars have established that this is the main driver of sustainable development in bilateral relationships. This research has revealed a trade imbalance between China and the parties it holds bilateral treaties with. This is not unrelated to the spillover effect of its oversized economy, hence both Nigeria and the EU are on the deficit side of their bilateral trade relations with China. However, the EU is looking for avenues to mitigate the trade imbalances caused by China's protectionist approach, which it adapts in a bid to stay ahead in its economic conquests. The realisation is that the bilateral relationship is presently unfavourable and the de-risking approach being adopted may bring about a turnaround in EU fortunes and achieve a balance of trade. Regardless of Hungary's stance in forging ahead with its bilateral fortunes with China, its position as a member state in the European Union means compliance with the sustainability schedule of the European Union to be carbon neutral by 2050. A co-benefit is already established in the business dealings between China and Hungary. Hungary provides the business location for China's electric cars in Europe as well as the Chinese manufacturing of batteries for sale in Europe, which translates into more jobs and economic development for Hungary and some foreign exchange earnings for the Chinese counterpart.

Nevertheless, compliance with the sustainability schedule of the EU, to be carbon neutral by 2050 in the long run of 25 years from now, creates numerous social-spatial-specific variants within the EU in the short term. In the Hungarian case, beyond the boundaries of specific manufacturing sites, in addition to the local population, NGOs have also expressed concerns about the broader regulatory environment surrounding battery production. Critics argue that legislative amendments and ministerial decrees have accelerated battery projects by declaring them as investments of national economic importance, thus bypassing strict environmental impact assessments and limiting public participation (Karácsony, 2022; Greenpeace, 2023; Chronowski, 2024). The expectations of the EU Battery Regulation 2023/1542, which introduces life-cycle management requirements, increasingly emphasises stakeholder engagement, transparency and social acceptance of battery projects also.

In addition to the shortcomings of the regulation itself, the shortcomings in the attitude towards stakeholder engagement and social acceptance in "outsider" countries with multidirectional (geo) political commitments poses not just worrying environmental and social risks, but a weakening of bilateral benefits at the same time.

Nigeria's economy is still heavily dependent on crude oil sales. According to Egbula and Zeng (2011), 87% of Nigeria's exports to China are oil and gas products. The challenge with this bilateral trade relationship with China is what one of Nigeria's finest political economists, Pat Utomi (2008), describes as the risk of heightened dependence on China, weak official Nigerian leverage in the relationship, the quality of project implementation and uncertainty over technology transfer. He argued that Nigerian policymakers are not setting policies that will have the strongest possible impact on Nigeria's long-term economic growth. IRENA (2023) believes that Nigeria lacks concrete implementation strategies that impede the actualisation of its fine policies. Whether it's fine policies or implementation strategies, the bottom line is actualisation of the plans to be net zero with strong renewable infrastructure that will put Nigeria on the renewable energy map. Corruption across levels and institutions of government and the lack of political will, no doubt, impact the existing weak official leverage. This broken governance system attracts a lack of clear-cut focus on the main purpose for engaging in action, even in bilateral agreements, led by the governor of Nasarawa state, was given of the company facilities and the lithium-rich location of the evergreen city in Nigeria, no concrete agreements about setting up shop in Nigeria. As can best be predicted, we may see a contract to purchase lithium for the company's production locations in Europe and Asia. This is no surprise because, according to the economic principle of location of business to the nearness of the market, Nigeria does not qualify since it is not ready for the location of an EV battery manufacturing company, according to industry players and stakeholders. Nigeria is not mature enough for electric vehicles; some of the obstacles include inadequate power supply, scarcity of certified EV technicians, limited charging infrastructure and the need for specialised training to service various EV models (Okamgba, 2024). There is no data on the number of electric vehicles in Nigeria. Information from Stallion Motors, which has a local sales point of electric cars in Nigeria, said the company has only sold 120 units of Kona (Nigeria's first EV), hence CATL cannot be faulted for not entering into discussions on setting up shop in Nigeria. Manpower and financial resources could have been saved from the so-called visit to China if questions about what interest the visit served for Nigeria's sustainable energy sourcing were posed. This has turned out to be just another case of political showmanship that goes nowhere. This same company has already established battery manufacturing agreements with Hungary which is in operation. This gives them access to market locations since the EU is one of the regions that has already invested in electric cars and boasts a high number of electric vehicles with 25% of the global share, which justifies why CATL went after Hungary to set up shop close to the source.

9. Conclusions

Pursuing greener, more sustainable energy sources is a win-win for the European Union and its member states, of which Hungary is a member, in reducing energy dependency from outside sources. Nigeria has crude oil as its economic mainstay, and there have been calls to diversify the economy. Infrastructural challenges involving energy supply for various uses – vehicular, household and manufacturing – in Nigeria are causing private initiatives to adopt greener, more sustainable energy sources (Osunmuyiwa & Kalfagianni, 2022). The most popular are solar and biogas. We are likely to see a bottom-up adoption strategy for Nigeria's sustainable development growth, driven by the frustration of an epileptic energy supply from government sources. Stakeholders under the auspices of the Renewable Energy Association of Nigeria are driving initiatives for renewable energy. This research statement was centred on China's bilateral relationship approach as being dependent on the other party's policy outlook. Nigeria and China mostly deal with energy in crude oil and gas products because this is Nigeria's primary economic outlook, while China's dealings with Hungary are centred on greener energy initiatives because this is Hungary's policy focus for an exit from energy dependency; it therefore provides China access to the EU EV market.

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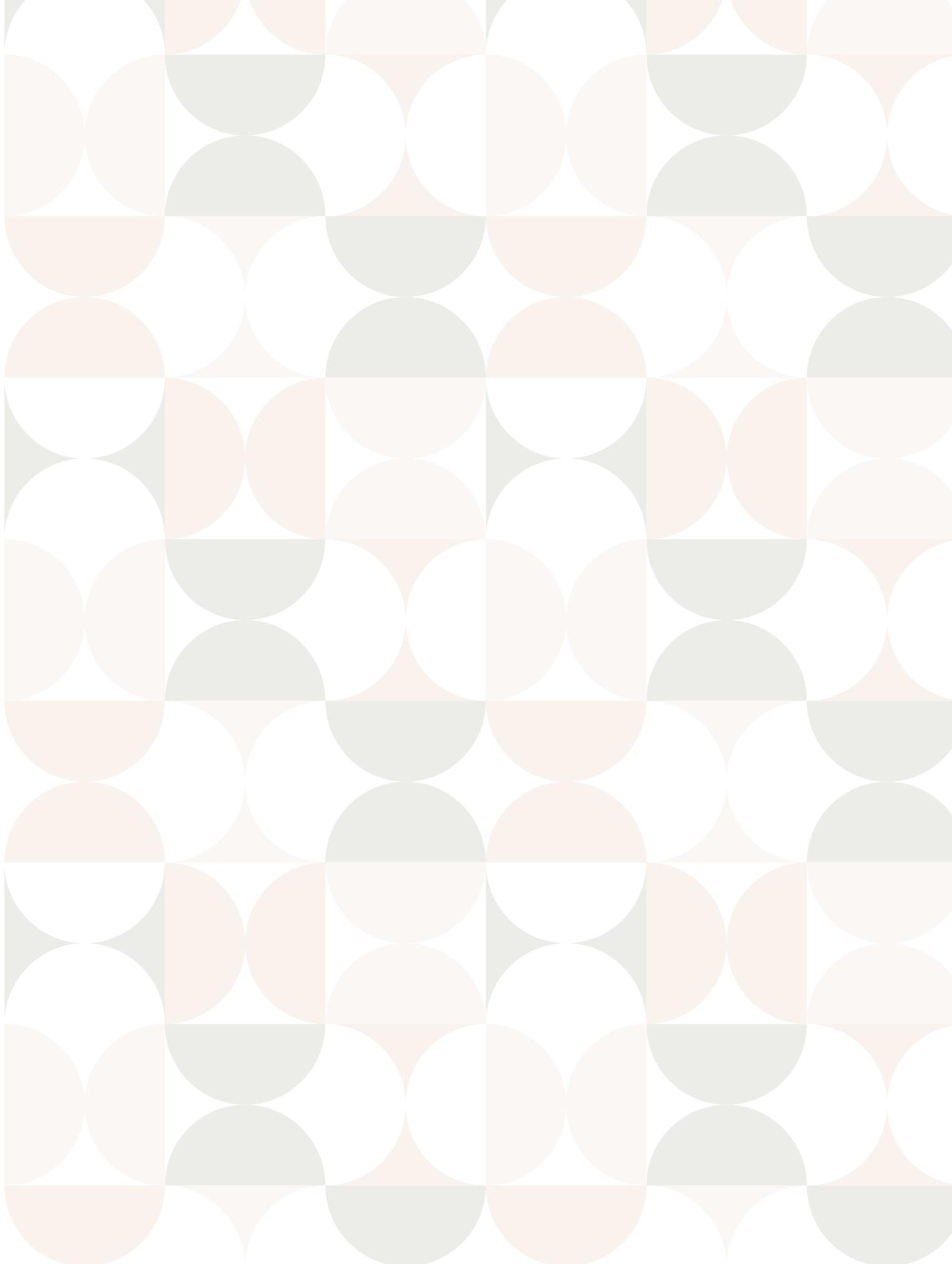
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II

SOUTHEAST ASIA COLUMN





TRAN TUYEN

Vietnam Rising
in the Multipolar Era

VIETNAM RISING IN THE MULTIPOLAR ERA: CONNECTING ASIA AND EUROPE THROUGH STRATEGIC POSITIONING, PRIVATE ECONOMY, AND PROACTIVE DIPLOMACY

TRAN TUYEN¹

Abstract

In the context of the emerging multipolar order, Vietnam has emerged as a unique middle power, consolidating domestic reforms while expanding its international influence. This article analyses Vietnam's rising trajectory through a conceptual model that connects three endogenous pillars – private economy, administrative reform, science and technology/innovation – with upgraded diplomacy based on the principle of hard non-alignment. Based on qualitative case studies with diverse sources, the article shows that domestic strength is the foundation for a balanced and proactive foreign policy, while diplomacy continues to consolidate domestic development. A comparison with Türkiye, Indonesia and South Korea shows that Vietnam represents a new variant of middle-power diplomacy – principled balance – separate from strategic autonomy or passive neutrality. The article makes a theoretical contribution by redefining the concept of middle power in the Eurasian space

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with the model of domestic strength–diplomacy–position. In practice, the study offers implications for other emerging countries in their search for a balance between openness and autonomy.

Keywords: Vietnam, Asia-Europe, strategic connectivity, private economy, innovation, upgraded diplomacy, national rise, strategic autonomy, multipolarity

1. Introduction

In a deeply changing international order, where traditional power centres are losing their monopoly and new poles of power are emerging, the Eurasian space is witnessing a strategic reconfiguration (Mesbahi, 2024; Rimmer, 2024; Vinokurov, 2014). Three main trends are closely linked and support each other in this region: first, there is a clear conflict between working together economically and dealing with security issues; second, new regional groups and projects are forming that are less controlled by outside countries; and third, the different parts of Eurasia are coming together to create a more connected and active strategic area. In this context, Southeast Asia – especially Vietnam – is not only a part of the expanding network of connections but is also repositioning itself as a subject capable of leading, shaping and connecting across continents.

From its geographical position as the frontier of the previous Asia-Europe axis, Vietnam is gradually becoming a transit hub, an alternative manufacturing base, and even a soft connector between value chains, capital flows and emerging institutional structures in the Asia-Europe space (Leung, 2010; Nguyen, 2018). This process of rising up did not happen suddenly but was the result of a series of selective opening-up policies, gradual institutional reforms, proactive economic integration and, in particular, a shift in diplomatic thinking - from engagement to creation (Hardi et al., 2024; Van Can & Dang, 2024; Voronova et al., 2025).

Stable economic growth with an average rate of 6-8% over the past two decades, along with the ability to maintain political independence and sovereignty in the context of great power competition, has made Vietnam a typical case of the strategy of rising up in a multipolar order (Hardi et al., 2024; Van Can & Dang, 2024). Vietnam does not seek to become a regional power but is becoming a reliable fulcrum for international partners, a dynamic integration partner and a pillar of strategic stability in the Greater Mekong Subregion (Trinh & Vu, 2024; Truong et al., 2024).

In particular, since 2023, diplomatic signals have shown a significant shift in the country's posture. The upgrading of relations to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with the United States, Australia, Singapore and a series of other partners is not only a manifestation of the multilateralisation strategy, but also a demonstration of Vietnam's acceptance of an increasingly important role in the international system (Nam & Cường, 2025; Trinh & Vu, 2024). At the same time, record FDI inflows reached USD 38.23 billion in 2024. The increasing role of the private sector in growth and efforts to build cross-regional logistics infrastructure have brought Vietnam closer to becoming an essential link in the Asia-Europe connectivity structure (Kim, 2024).

However, the journey to rise up is not just a matter of growth or technical integration. It is also a matter of strategic repositioning, requiring Vietnam to clearly define its role in the new context: could Vietnam serve as a transit point? Is Vietnam acting as an intermediary in this new context? Or, as a soft convergence centre, a place to meet and reconcile initiatives, interests and visions from East to West, from North to South?

This article proposes an approach to Vietnam’s rising era from three interwoven pillars: (i) Vietnam’s role in the reconnected Asia-Europe space, (ii) endogenous momentum from the private sector and FDI capital flows and (iii) a proactive and flexible diplomatic model, but maintaining the principles of independence and autonomy. The contribution of this study lies in redefining the role of a middle power through the “internal power–diplomacy–position” model, and providing policy implications for Vietnam and its partners in shaping the restructured Eurasian order.

2. Analytical framework and method

2.1. Analytical framework

The article is placed in the research stream on the role of middle powers in the reshaping of international order. According to the middle power theory, these are countries that are not in the group of great powers but have the ability to influence the regional structure through multilateral diplomacy, mediation and rising economic and institutional capacity (Dinh Tinh & Thu Ngan, 2022; Le, 2019). Vietnam, with its geopolitical position and increasing internal strength, increasingly shows the typical characteristics of a middle power in the Eurasian space.

In parallel, the concept of strategic hedging is used to explain how Vietnam balances its relations with major countries. Hedging does not mean absolute neutrality, but a combination of cooperation and prevention, in order to maintain flexibility and avoid falling into a state of dependence (Tran & Sato, 2018). This is especially important when Vietnam is in the midst of increasingly fierce US-China competition.

Keohane and Nye’s concept of complex interdependence is also suggestive, because the increase in economic–technological–data connectivity makes Vietnam benefit from both integration and face spillover risks from global shocks (Keohane & Nye, 1987). This is the analytical framework that helps the article explain the relationship between deep integration and security – sovereignty challenges.

Within the scope of the article, three key concepts will be clarified:

- **Hard non-alignment:** different to traditional neutrality that avoids participating in international politics, Vietnam’s hard non-alignment demonstrates a resolute stance of not choosing sides but still actively participating and contributing to multilateral mechanisms.
- **Strategic autonomy:** a concept often associated with the European Union and recently Türkiye, reflecting the ability to pursue national interests without depending on a single

| Table 1. Analytical framework | | | |
|---|--|---|---|
| Concept | Meaning | Role in the Vietnamese context | Impact on regional and international position |
| Private economy | Non-state production and business sector, including SMEs and large private corporations. | Affirmed in Resolution 68-NQ/TW (2025) and Resolution 198/2025/QH15; serves as a driver of innovation and integration into global value chains. | Enhances economic competitiveness, positioning Vietnam as a new manufacturing and processing hub in Asia. |
| Administrative and institutional reform | Streamlining the state apparatus, digitising public services, ensuring a transparent business environment. | Reorganisation of administrative units (2024–2025); establishment of a two-tier government model; development of a digital government. | Increases Vietnam’s credibility with international investors, improves global competitiveness rankings. |
| Science, technology and innovation | Development of knowledge, new technologies and innovative startups. | Resolution 57-NQ/TW (2024) sets a goal that by 2030 Vietnam will lead in innovation capacity among upper middle-income countries. | Enables Vietnam’s shift from outsourcing to innovation, strengthening its role in the Asia–Europe tech value chain. |
| Proactive diplomacy (<i>hard non-alignment</i>) | Firm non-alignment: not choosing sides, but actively participating in and shaping multilateral structures. | Comprehensive upgrading of strategic partnerships (US, Japan, Korea, Australia, EU, etc.) during 2023–2025, while balancing China and Russia. | Establishes Vietnam’s position as a constructive actor in the multipolar Eurasian order, enhancing international credibility. |
| Supporting concept: strategic autonomy | Capacity to pursue national interests independently, without relying on a single power pole. | Embodied in the principles of independence – self-reliance – diversification and multilateralisation. | Helps Vietnam maintain strategic balance and flexibility amid US–China competition. |
| Supporting concept: soft connectivity | Non-physical linkages: institutions, policies, technology, human resources. | Implementation of new-generation FTAs (CPTPP, EVFTA, RCEP); promotion of digital transformation and high-quality human resources. | Strengthens Asia–Europe connectivity, enabling Vietnam to shape trade rules and regional cooperation frameworks. |

Source: Author’s own work.

- **Hard non-alignment:** Application by Vietnam, at an appropriate level, based on the principle of independence and autonomy.
- **Soft connectivity:** emphasises the institutional, policy, technological and human-resource aspects in Asia-Europe connectivity, complementing hard infrastructure (seaports, railways, logistics). Vietnam is promoting soft connectivity through new-generation FTAs, digital transformation and improving the quality of human resources.

With the combination of the middle-state theory, strategic hedging and complex linkages, along with clearly defining key concepts, the article aims at an integrated analytical framework explaining how the three endogenous pillars (private economy, institutional reform, science and technology & innovation) interact with proactive diplomacy, thereby creating Vietnam’s rising position in the context of a multipolar world that is forming.

2.2. Method

This paper takes a qualitative research direction with a typical case study nature, focusing on the rise of Vietnam in the period 2023–2025 as an important turning point. The reason for choosing this period comes from a series of strategic changes, including Vietnam upgrading its comprehensive strategic partnership with the United States and a number of other major partners; the issuance of important resolutions by the Politburo on private economic development (Resolution 68-NQ/TW), science, technology and innovation (Resolution 57-NQ/TW), administrative reform and administrative unit arrangement; as well as signs of increasing FDI inflows, innovation in growth models and the restructuring of global supply chains.

Data sources used in the article include:

- Academic documents: studies on Scopus, Web of Science, and a number of prestigious international journals related to foreign policy, economic development and innovation in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.
- Policy and legal documents: Politburo resolutions, national reports, documents of the National Assembly and the Government of Vietnam, as well as official diplomatic communiqués during the period 2020–2025.
- Socio-economic data sources: statistics from the General Statistics Office of Vietnam (GSO), the Ministry of Planning and Investment, the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), UNCTAD and international economic reports.
- International indices and reports: Global Innovation Index (GII), PAPI Index, Global Competitiveness Index (WEF), as well as assessments of diplomatic, trade and investment networks.
- Official and specialised media sources: news and analysis from the official Vietnamese press, as well as reputable international news agencies (Reuters, Nikkei Asia, Financial Times) to supplement current affairs perspectives and updated data.

The analysis process is conducted in two steps. First, data is classified according to three endogenous pillars: (i) private economy and FDI motivation; (ii) administrative and institutional reform; (iii) science, technology and innovation. Second, these factors are placed in relation to the security-diplomatic context, thereby showing the interaction between domestic motivation and Vietnam's international position. This approach helps clarify the argument that it is the combination of internal reform and proactive diplomacy that has contributed to enhancing Vietnam's strategic position in the rapidly changing Eurasian space.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Domestic drivers

3.1.1. Private economy – From supplementary to central

Over the past three decades, Vietnam's private economic sector has gradually matured from being a supplementary role to an important driving force of the economy. In the post-Doi Moi period, despite having to overcome many institutional barriers and historical prejudices, this sector has continued to grow, currently accounting for more than 43% of GDP and contributing nearly 85% of total employment in society. This growth is not only quantitative but also implies a qualitative shift in the state's development thinking: from management to creation, from concentration to expanding space for autonomous, creative and globally reaching enterprises.

The Politburo's issuance of Resolution No. 68-NQ/TW (2025) on private economic development signifies a significant political shift. No longer considered a supplementary sector, the private economy is identified as one of the most important driving forces of the national economy, playing a pioneering role in innovation and digital transformation. This resolution eliminates historical prejudices and sets a clear goal: by 2030, there will be at least 2 million private enterprises, of which at least 20 large enterprises are capable of participating in the global value chain. The private sector contributes up to 58% of GDP, accounts for 40% of state budget revenue and creates jobs for 85% of the workforce.

To realise that vision, a series of comprehensive solutions have been proposed: perfecting the socialist-oriented market economic institution, protecting private property rights, improving access to capital - land - markets and promoting an innovative startup environment. Along with that, Resolution 198/2025/QH15 on special policy mechanisms was also passed by the National Assembly, in which the highlight is the policy of exempting corporate income tax for the first 3 years for small and medium-sized enterprises established after the resolution takes effect (17 May 2025). The exemption is a strategic step to create a safe buffer zone for new enterprises, especially in the context of increasingly fierce regional competition.

The impact of this rise is not limited to economic development. Regionally, the increasing presence of Vietnamese enterprises in new supply chains – especially after the post-COVID-19 shift and US-China trade tensions – has helped Vietnam affirm its position as a new manufacturing and processing centre in Asia. In terms of foreign affairs, the dynamic private economy has become a soft business card, increasing Vietnam's influence through overseas investment projects, cross-border M&A activities and active participation in new-generation FTA networks such as CPTPP, EVFTA and RCEP. FDI flows reinforce this trajectory: in 2024 alone, Vietnam attracted USD 38.23 billion in newly registered and adjusted FDI, with USD 25.35 billion disbursed, ranking it among the top three FDI destinations in ASEAN and among the 15 developing countries attracting the largest FDI in the world. Regarding investment partners, 114 countries and territories invested in Vietnam in 2024. Singapore took the lead with a total investment capital of nearly USD 10.21

billion, accounting for 26.7% of the total capital. South Korea ranked second with nearly USD 7.06 billion, accounting for 18.5%, followed by China, Hong Kong (China) and Japan. It is forecasted that FDI capital will continue to flow strongly into Vietnam, especially in manufacturing and high-tech sectors such as the semiconductor industry, artificial intelligence, digital transformation, logistics, etc. (Tuong Phi et al., 2024).

From a structural perspective, the growth of the private sector enhances national competitiveness and contributes to strengthening Vietnam's strategic internal strength in the Asia-Europe space. When Vietnam proactively positions itself as a logistics-production-service connection point between Southeast Asia and Asia - Europe connectivity initiatives (Belt and Road, INSTC, Global Gateway, etc.), the private sector is the driving force to help those strategies become reality, avoiding any dependence on the rigid institutions of big countries.

However, this momentum is not without challenges. Vietnam's private sector remains heavily dependent on external markets and FDI, making it vulnerable to global shocks, decoupling trends and supply chain disruptions (Tuong Phi et al., 2024). Rapid expansion has also generated side effects: growing inequality between regions, environmental stress in resource-intensive industries (such as energy and mining) and regulatory gaps in emerging sectors like fintech or digital platforms. Institutional inertia, such as inconsistent law enforcement, limited judicial capacity and bureaucratic red tape, further constrain entrepreneurial dynamism. These vulnerabilities suggest that sustaining the private economy as a strategic driver requires not only continuous reform but also enhanced regulatory frameworks and stronger risk management (Kayani & Nasim, 2024).

Addressing these contradictions is essential for Vietnam to consolidate its role as a reliable production and logistics hub in Asia-Europe connectivity initiatives, transforming domestic dynamism into sustainable international credibility.

3.1.2. Administrative reform and institutional restructuring

Along with the growth of the private economy, administrative reform in Vietnam has been identified as a key pillar in building a state that serves and accompanies the people and businesses. Since the early 2000s, but particularly accelerated since 2016 with the comprehensive state administrative reform program for the 2021–2030 period, Vietnam has been shifting from a management state model to a development-creating state. The spirit of reform is expressed at many levels: simplifying administrative procedures, digitising public services, reducing business conditions and enhancing accountability and transparency in decision-making processes.

In 2025, Vietnam is in the process of rearranging provincial- and commune-level administrative units, aiming to build a two-level local government organisation model (province–commune, instead of the current three levels). After completion, the whole country will have 34 provincial-level administrative units, including 6 centrally run cities and 28 provinces. This streamlining not only reduces the cost of the apparatus and improves management efficiency but is also consistent with the goal of building an e-government and digital transformation.

Along with that, the spirit of reform is clearly demonstrated through efforts to shorten administrative procedures, integrate public services on digital platforms and promote the vision of a Digital Government – Digital Citizens – Digital Economy. According to the Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI), people's satisfaction with public services in many localities has improved significantly; at the same time, Vietnam also improved its standing in global competitiveness and the World Bank's business environment rankings in the years before the pandemic. Although there are many challenges, such as unsynchronised decentralisation, uneven capacity of civil servants or the situation of hot at the top and cold at the bottom, the reform trend is irreversible.

However, institutional restructuring also reveals contradictions. Streamlining the apparatus and pushing digital transformation can generate tension between efficiency and inclusiveness, as rural and disadvantaged areas risk being left behind in digital access. In addition, decentralisation without adequate local capacity creates risks of uneven implementation and weak accountability. These challenges highlight that Vietnam's administrative reform is not only about cutting red tape but also about building regulatory resilience and ensuring that governance reform translates into equitable benefits for society at large.

More importantly, the enabling state is not only an efficient operating apparatus but also a driver of innovation, creating space for social forces – especially young people and businesses – to develop dynamically. In this interaction, administrative reform plays the role of an institutional ecosystem, thereby creating conditions for Vietnam to integrate more deeply into the Asia–Europe regional value chains while shaping its own identity as a Southeast Asian country that is rising responsibly and with vision.

3.1.3. Science, technology and innovation – a new driving force for national development

During the period of Vietnam proactively restructuring its economy and expanding its international presence, science, technology and innovation (STI) are increasingly being affirmed as an important foundation for national competitiveness. From being a complementary factor, science, technology and innovation are becoming the centre of the national development strategy, contributing to changing the growth model towards improving productivity, efficiency and sustainability. This shift not only helps Vietnam overcome the middle-income trap but also expands its ability to participate in global value chains in a more proactive role, especially in the reshaping of the Asia–Europe space.

The Politburo issued Resolution No. 57-NQ/TW (22 December 2024) with a clear direction: science, technology, innovation and digital transformation are the main driving forces behind national development. This is a strategic document to help Vietnam escape the middle-income trap and become a high-income developed country by 2045. Some notable goals include:

- By 2030, Vietnam achieves advanced levels of science and technology in many fields, ranking among the leading countries in upper middle-income groups.

- By 2045, becoming a regional centre of innovation in several fields, contributing to sustainable development and technological autonomy.

Highlights in the Resolution include comprehensive digital transformation, not only in public administration but also in production, services, logistics and agriculture; increasing public and private investment in science and technology, encouraging public–private partnerships in applied research; and training high-quality human resources while establishing connections with international programmes focused on AI, new materials, biotechnology and big data.

The Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation Development to 2030 clearly defines the goal of developing research, application and innovation capacity in enterprises, especially in the private sector. Programmes such as the National High-Tech Development Programme, the National Technology Innovation Programme or the National Innovation Center (NIC) network have created a strong push for Vietnam’s innovation ecosystem.

In addition, the rise of Vietnamese private technology enterprises, from telecommunications and software to fintech, AI and biotechnology, is contributing to changing Vietnam’s image on the regional technology map. Corporations such as FPT, Viettel, VNG or unicorn startups such as VNG and Sky Mavis have affirmed their ability to reach out to regional and international markets, competing in the high value-added segment. Furthermore, Vietnam is gradually integrating more deeply into interregional science and technology initiatives. Within ASEAN, Vietnam plays a proactive role in digitalisation, AI and cybersecurity programmes. On the Asia–Europe trajectory, Vietnam has the opportunity to act as a technology bridge in the smart supply chain, as multinational corporations are repositioning their production chains to avoid dependence on a single point. Participation in technology alliances such as QUAD (at observer level), international AI forums or the signing of green technology transfer agreements with the EU and Japan are opening new arenas of action for Vietnam in terms of technology, standards and market strategies.

Lastly, science, technology and innovation play an essential role in solving sustainable development problems, from climate change to energy transition. Vietnam has committed to carbon neutrality by 2050, and to realise this goal, the country cannot rely on the old development model. Battery technology, solar power, offshore wind, green hydrogen or circular economic models all require strong innovation capacity linked to transparent and stable investment incentive policy mechanisms and international cooperation.

Despite these advances, important challenges remain. Vietnam’s R&D intensity is still modest (around 0.5% of GDP, below the ASEAN-6 average), and the innovation ecosystem is heavily reliant on imported technologies rather than indigenous breakthroughs. Many private firms engage more in technology adoption than genuine innovation, while weak intellectual property enforcement discourages high-value R&D investment. In addition, the uneven quality of human resources, especially the shortage of STEM professionals, creates a bottleneck for sustaining innovation-driven growth. Without addressing these gaps, Vietnam risks falling into a situation where it participates

in global value chains primarily at the assembly stage rather than as a true source of technological innovation.

These limitations indicate that science, technology and innovation, while central to Vietnam’s development vision, must be accompanied by deeper institutional reforms and sustained international collaboration. Only then can they enhance not just Vietnam’s domestic productivity but also its credibility abroad, reinforcing its image as a proactive, responsible and innovative actor in Asia–Europe connectivity.

3.1.4. Risks, conflicts and limitations

In addition to remarkable achievements, Vietnam’s three endogenous pillars - private economy, administrative reform and science, technology and innovation - still contain many risks and conflicts, which can hinder progress if not handled promptly and synchronously.

First, although the private economic sector is developing rapidly, it is still heavily dependent on the market and capital flows from outside. The structure of Vietnamese enterprises is mainly small and medium-sized, with limited competitiveness, making it difficult to participate at high-value stages in the supply chain. The rapid expansion of some industries such as energy, real estate or financial technology (fintech) also creates risks in governance, wealth disparity and social instability. If not tightly regulated, the private sector can increase inequality and environmental pressure, instead of becoming a driving force for sustainable development.

Second, although administrative reform has created clear changes, it is not uniform. The situation of hot above, cold below, the lack of consistency in decentralisation and the uneven capacity of civil servants have prevented the reform from going into depth. The process of merging administrative units poses the risk of reducing the efficiency of public service provision in difficult areas, while creating pressure to adjust personnel and management apparatus. Promoting a digital government also comes with the risk of a digital divide, especially in remote areas where people and small businesses have difficulty accessing new technology. Third, science, technology and innovation, although placed in a central position, still face many limitations. Investment in R&D is still low (only about 0.5% of GDP, below the ASEAN-6 average), basic research capacity is weak and is heavily dependent on technology transfer from outside. Most businesses only stop at the level of applying available technology, rarely creating breakthrough innovations. The lack of high-quality human resources, especially in STEM industries, makes the ability to catch up with new technology trends (AI, green energy, new materials) not commensurate with the potential.

In general, these contradictions reflect the trade-off problem between speed and sustainability: rapid growth but prone to inequality and environmental risks; strong administrative reform but the risk of missing vulnerable groups; expanding innovation but lacking an endogenous knowledge base. Without adjustment mechanisms and accompanying support policies, endogenous pillars will find it difficult to maintain their role as strategic driving forces in the long term.

From an international perspective, these risks also affect the reputation and sustainability of Vietnam’s position. An economy that relies too much on FDI, an administrative apparatus that has not been thoroughly reformed, or an innovation ecosystem lacking a basic scientific foundation will easily shake Vietnam’s image as a rising connector in the Asia-Europe space. Therefore, along with affirming achievements, it is necessary to look directly at limitations to build resilience and sustainability for the growth strategy.

3.2. Security and diplomacy – Vietnam’s proactive non-alignment in a multipolar context

In the current Eurasian space, a prominent paradox is the parallel between increasingly deep economic integration and increasing security fragmentation (Vinokurov, 2014). Southeast Asia clearly demonstrates this contradiction: it is both a new production-consumption centre, strongly attracting trade and investment, and a hotbed of great power competition and non-traditional security challenges. In that context, Vietnam has emerged as a country that is both proactively integrating and flexibly navigating strategic cracks with a principled balance of thinking (Van Can & Dang, 2024).

Economically, Vietnam is one of the earliest and deepest Southeast Asian countries to participate in the new generation of FTAs(CPTPP, EVFTA, RCEP), connecting more than 60 economies, accounting for over 90% of global GDP. This network creates an institutional buffer that helps Vietnam reduce its dependence on one pole, while raising production standards and improving competitiveness. However, the more Vietnam integrates economically, the more security pressures it faces – especially in the East Sea, where the interests of many powers intersect and are in dispute. Vietnam persists in its stance of respecting international law, especially UNCLOS 1982, but still faces increasing militarisation and unilateral sovereignty imposition by some countries, posing a major challenge to regional stability. In addition, non-traditional security challenges such as climate change, cybersecurity and pandemics are also increasingly severe. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the weaknesses of the public health system, while climate change seriously threatens the Mekong Delta – the country’s rice granary. In the technology-data space, Vietnam is facing pressure to choose between American, Chinese and European standards, and is forced to affirm a digital governance model based on the principles of digital sovereignty and sustainable development.

In the face of these pressures, Vietnam pursues an upgraded diplomatic strategy combined with hard non-alignment. Unlike neutrality, which is associated with standing outside, Vietnam’s hard non-alignment is both resolutely not choosing sides and proactively participating in creating the rules of the game, improving its balancing capacity. The “Four Nos” policy in defence (no military alliances; no alliances against other countries; no foreign military bases; no use of force or threat of force) is the foundation, but has been applied more flexibly in the new era.

A typical example is 2023–2025, when Vietnam continuously upgraded its relations with the United States (Comprehensive Strategic Partnership), Japan (Global Strategic Partnership for Peace and

Prosperity), while maintaining close relations with China, Russia, India and the EU. Meanwhile, its proactive role in forums such as ASEAN, ASEM, ADMM-Plus and the United Nations Security Council (2020–2021) shows that Vietnam not only participates but also creates regional and global cooperation.

Table 2. Timeline of Vietnam’s comprehensive strategic partnerships (2023–2025)

| Period | Partner | Notes |
|--------|----------------|--|
| Sep-23 | United States | Established the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Peace, Cooperation, and Sustainable Development. |
| Nov-23 | Japan | Upgraded to a Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia and the World. |
| Mar-24 | Australia | Established the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. |
| Oct-24 | France | Established the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. |
| Nov-24 | Malaysia | Established the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. |
| Feb-25 | New Zealand | Established the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. |
| Mar-25 | Indonesia | Established the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. |
| Mar-25 | Singapore | Established the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. |
| May-25 | Thailand | Established the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. |
| Oct-25 | United Kingdom | Established the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. |

Source: Author’s own work.

Vietnam’s acquisition of nine Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships in just over three years (2023–2025) demonstrates unprecedented speed and scale in the country’s modern diplomatic history. Compared to other ASEAN countries, the quantity and quality of Vietnam’s comprehensive strategic partnerships are clearly outstanding. While Indonesia and Thailand have only established limited partnerships with a few major powers, Vietnam has simultaneously balanced all three main poles of the international order: the US–China–Russia, while expanding to Europe (France, EU), India–Japan–Korea in Northeast Asia and Australia–New Zealand in the Pacific. This network of partners not only demonstrates the diversification and multilateralisation of foreign policy but also affirms Vietnam as a middle power capable of confidently choosing and shaping the rules of the game.

In the context of increasing strategic competition, maintaining balanced relations with many major power centres simultaneously helps Vietnam minimise the risk of being isolated or forced to take sides. At the same time, it expands the policy space for Vietnam to take advantage of development resources, from technology, investment, trade to security and defence. Notably, the focus on upgrading relations in the 2023–2025 period also reflects the upgraded diplomatic strategy that Vietnam is pursuing, turning diplomacy into a soft-power pillar alongside the three endogenous pillars. This is a clear sign that Vietnam is no longer just a country adapting to the regional order, but is becoming a structural builder in the Asia-Europe space.

Vietnam has similarities with Türkiye in the concept of strategic autonomy and with Indonesia in its free and active policy. However, the difference is that Vietnam maintains rigid non-alignment, little military involvement and emphasises international law and sovereignty. This approach gives Vietnam the flexibility to balance the US and China without being swayed like many other developing countries. However, the combination of deep integration and strategic balance also has potential trade-offs. Overly open economic relations can increase trade and investment dependence on some major markets, while maintaining hard non-alignment requires persistent diplomatic resources to avoid being drawn in. In addition, as the US-China competition escalates, the ability to maintain principled balance will become increasingly difficult.

Overall, upgraded diplomacy and a hard non-alignment policy have made Vietnam a prestigious actor, recognised as a middle power with a constructive role in the Asia-Europe structure. This both protects national interests and helps Vietnam contribute to stabilising the regional order – a distinguishing feature of the current rising stage.

3.3. Comparative perspective – Middle powers in Asia–Europe

The concept of middle powers in international relations is used to refer to countries that do not have the global power equal to the great powers, but still possess the ability to shape the regional situation through a combination of economic power, institutional capacity and multilateral diplomatic roles. In the context of Asia–Europe being strongly reshaped, middle powers are increasingly playing an important role in balancing great powers, protecting national interests and creating new cooperative structures.

Comparing Vietnam with Türkiye, Indonesia and South Korea not only clarifies the similarities in the principled balance strategy but also shows the uniqueness of Vietnam as an emerging middle power in Southeast Asia.

Türkiye is often considered a typical case of strategic autonomy. Being a NATO member, purchasing the Russian S-400 air defence system and maintaining a complex partnership with the European Union, Türkiye has become a hinge state – a hinge between East and West. Ankara’s approach shows that a middle power can take advantage of its geopolitical position to expand its space for action and avoid dependence on one power pole. However, Türkiye’s model also shows the risks: dependence on hard power and military involvement on many fronts (Syria, Libya, Caucasus) makes the autonomous strategy both create more influence and push the country into conflicts that are not easy to control. Indonesia stands out with its free and active policy – a form of soft hedging that relies heavily on multilateral diplomacy and a central role in ASEAN. Jakarta maintains its independence from US-China competition, while promoting its coordinating role in regional issues such as the South China Sea, Mekong-Lancang Cooperation or climate change. Indonesia’s strategy helps it maintain its prestige and avoid being drawn in, but its limitations lie in the fact that its initiative is often distracted by its weak economic strength, while ASEAN is having increasing difficulty reaching consensus on complex security issues.

South Korea offers another variation of middle-power diplomacy. Despite its dependence on the security alliance with the US, Seoul still seeks to expand its strategic space through the New Southern Policy (strengthening relations with ASEAN and India), investing in global cooperation mechanisms (G20, OECD) and asserting its technological and innovative capabilities to enhance its position. South Korea represents the semi-autonomy model: not completely autonomous, but still capable of creating the rules of the game and becoming one of the influential voices on the Asia-Europe chessboard.

Table 3. Comparison of middle-power policies in the Asia-Europe space

| Country | Level of autonomy | Characteristic strategy | Limits/Risks |
|-------------|---|--|--|
| Türkiye | Strategic autonomy within NATO while engaging Russia and the EU. | Leverages position as a hinge state, balancing West and Eurasia. | Multiple military entanglements, risk of overextension, tensions with NATO allies. |
| Indonesia | Free and active foreign policy, independent within ASEAN. | Relies on multilateral diplomacy, ASEAN centrality as a balancing tool. | Economic capacity still limited; ASEAN consensus often weak; influence dispersed. |
| South Korea | Security alliance with the US, semi-autonomous in regional affairs. | Semi-autonomy: US reliance for security, expands New Southern Policy, technology leverage. | Security dependence on the US, limited room for independent balancing. |
| Vietnam | Hard non-alignment, principle of independence and self-reliance. | Upgraded diplomacy, three endogenous pillars, 13 comprehensive strategic partnerships. | FDI dependence, climate vulnerability, uneven institutional reform. |

Source: Author’s own work.

Vietnam, in this comparison, represents a unique variation of middle-class national policy. Unlike Türkiye, Vietnam does not rely on hard military power but on three endogenous pillars (private economy – institutional reform – innovation) combined with upgraded diplomacy and a hard non-alignment stance. Unlike Indonesia, Vietnam does not stop at adaptation but increasingly demonstrates its structural creation role, in which it continuously proposes initiatives on maritime security, Mekong cooperation and sustainable supply chains in ASEAN and ASEM. Compared to South Korea, Vietnam has the advantage of being more independent because it is not bound by a military alliance, thereby maintaining the multilateralisation–diversification principle in a flexible manner.

From this comparison, it can be concluded that Vietnam is forming a new middle-power model in the Asia-Europe space, tentatively called principled hedging – a balancing strategy based on international law, internal reform strength and a comprehensive network of strategic partnerships. If Türkiye represents a middle power based on hard power, Indonesia represents a middle power based on ASEAN diplomacy, and South Korea represents a middle power based on technology and alliances, then Vietnam stands out as an emerging middle power that can combine the above elements, but is guided by the principles of independence – autonomy and constructive orientation.

At theoretical level, this suggests that the concept of middle power in the Asia-Europe space is diversifying, no longer revolving around hard power or the role of the intermediary, but also including countries that take advantage of internal reform and soft diplomacy to improve their position. Vietnam, with its internal strength–diplomacy–position approach, has added a new variation to the middle state research stream, and demonstrated that a Southeast Asian country can absolutely become a constructive connector – a tectonic bridge between East Asia, Southeast Asia and Europe in the multipolar era.

3.4. Research implications

This study offers several important implications for academic research, approaches and policy practice.

3.4.1. Theoretical implications

First, comparing Vietnam with Türkiye, Indonesia and South Korea shows that the concept of middle power is not only associated with traditional hard power or alliances, but is expanding to new variations, which can be called principled hedging. The case of Vietnam suggests a way to redefine the middle power in the 21st century: power does not necessarily come from military scale or regional institutions, but from the ability to combine reformed internal strength with upgraded diplomacy on the basis of the principle of independence and autonomy. This is a conceptual contribution to the study of middle power in the Eurasian space, which is often dominated by familiar cases such as Türkiye or South Korea.

Second, the analysis of the three endogenous pillars (private economy, institutional reform, science, technology and innovation) in parallel with proactive diplomacy helps to expand the analytical framework for international research. Instead of focusing on diplomacy alone, the case of Vietnam shows that internal strength and diplomacy cannot be separated, but must be viewed as a entire internal strength–diplomacy position. This can be the basis for building a new theoretical model during the rise of middle-sized countries in a multipolar context.

3.4.2. Practical implications

From a policy perspective, the study emphasises that Vietnam's rise is not only a result of foreign affairs but also based on internal reform strength. This brings three implications:

For Vietnam, the key lesson is to maintain a balance between speed and sustainability: developing the private sector but controlling inequality and the environment; administrative reform but ensuring inclusiveness; and innovation but avoiding dependence on imported technology. Only when internal strength is strong enough can upgraded diplomacy have a solid foundation.

For ASEAN, the case of Vietnam shows that a member can go beyond the limits of ASEAN centrality to become a constructive agent. This both complements and challenges ASEAN: the question of how to harmonise the collective role with individual but influential efforts.

For partners outside the region, the study affirms that Vietnam is a constructive connector – a reliable bridge between East Asia, Southeast Asia and Europe. To take advantage of this role, partners need

to see Vietnam not only as a production or investment destination, but as a partner capable of shaping the rules of the game, especially in the fields of trade, technology and sustainable development.

In short, this study not only adds a new case study to the theory of middle powers in a multipolar order, but also affirms that Vietnam's path to rising up has a broad reference value for countries seeking a balanced strategy between integration and autonomy, between cooperation and principles.

4. Conclusions

In the era of multipolarity and the re-engaging of Asia and Europe, Vietnam has emerged not only as a dynamic economy in Southeast Asia, but also as a middle power with the ability to shape regional and inter-regional order. This process is nurtured by the convergence of three internal pillars and upgraded diplomacy: the growth of the private sector and FDI, administrative reform towards a developmental state and the rise of science, technology and innovation. These three pillars have created a solid foundation of internal strength, not only enhancing national competitiveness but also increasing Vietnam's weight on the broader economic and strategic chessboard between Asia and Europe. At the same time, Vietnam has chosen a separate diplomatic path - upgraded diplomacy combined with hard non-alignment. The multilateralisation–diversification policy is materialised by a wide network of partnerships from the US, Japan, India, the EU to Australia and New Zealand, while maintaining balanced relations with China and Russia. Comparison with other cases such as Türkiye, Indonesia and South Korea further highlights Vietnam's uniqueness.

However, the study also shows that Vietnam's rise is not smooth. The contradictions between rapid growth and sustainable development, between strong administrative reform and the digital divide, between innovation and dependence on imported technology still remain real limits. In addition, US-China tensions, climate change and the risk of the middle-income trap may be factors that hinder the process of rising. Therefore, risk management capacity, institutional consolidation and high-quality human resource development will determine the sustainability of Vietnam's position over the next decade.

Academically, this study contributes a new analytical framework for middle-sized states in the Eurasian context, in which internal strength and diplomacy are viewed as two sides of the same coin. The internal strength–diplomacy–position model not only explains the case of Vietnam but can also be applied to the study of other middle-sized states. Practically, the article emphasises that Vietnam's rise is not only a matter of diplomacy, but also the result of a comprehensive internal reform strategy. This is what makes the difference and the reference value for countries seeking an independent development pathway in a multipolar world. In short, Vietnam is entering a new era with a harmonious combination of endogenous reform and principled diplomacy. Instead of just adapting to the new order, Vietnam is participating in creating it, becoming a responsible and influential actor in Asia-Europe connectivity. This is not only a national rise, but also a case study that helps broaden understanding of the role of middle powers in the emerging world order.

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DEAN KARALEKAS

Scylla and Charybdis
in the Natuna Sea

SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS IN THE NATUNA SEA: ALL EYES ON THE FUTURE COURSE SET BY PRABOWO

DEAN KARALEKAS¹

Abstract

Indonesia has long been adept at charting a delicate course between two regional giants, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States. A staunch security ally of Washington, participating in several joint military exchanges, Jakarta is simultaneously the largest Southeast Asian recipient of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This delicate balancing act has been described as a "double hedging strategy". The results of the nation's recent election, however, raise questions as to whether that precarious strategic balance will undergo a shift. Since the electoral victory of General (Ret.) Prabowo Subianto, analysts have been speculating as to how the new leader's strong personality will be reflected in his strategic policy. This paper examines several factors that demand attention as we move forward, including Prabowo's well-established realist approach to international relations; his record of boosting cooperation with the United States to counter the PRC's expanding influence; his almost Nixonesque first visit to China; a focus on restoring Indonesia's stature through military strength; and a shift of balance in the country's civil-military relations. The ship of state has a new captain, and how deftly he navigates its continued sovereignty between the Scylla and Charybdis of regional and global superpowers promises to redefine Indonesia's role on the world stage and impact the extent of its regional influence.

Keywords: Indonesia's foreign policy, Prabowo Subianto, China–Indonesia relations, BRICS+ and de-dollarisation, South China Sea tensions

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1. Introduction

Ever since Prabowo Subianto was sworn in as Indonesia's eighth president in a ceremony that took place on 20 October 2024, there has been much speculation as to what policy direction his administration will set, especially with regard to the all-important financial and trade relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC), as well as the security relationship with the United States. Upon taking office, Prabowo immediately made moves that hinted that foreign policy under his administration would differ in some measure from that of his predecessor, President Joko Widodo (known as Jokowi), at least insofar as the principle of *Bebas dan Aktif* is concerned. Essentially meaning "free and active", *Bebas dan Aktif* has been the cornerstone of Indonesian foreign policy since the days of Sukarno. While campaigning for president, Prabowo vowed to transition to a "good neighbour policy" of sorts, in which (as the saying goes) a thousand friends are too few, and a single enemy, too many. While this expression may seem somewhat Pollyannaish, it reflects a genuine desire to engage productively with the regional – as well as the international – community. Moreover, from a realist perspective, it pragmatically allows the government to avoid becoming pigeonholed into a restrictive foreign policy ideology, and gives it the freedom to flirt with shifting orbits whenever the need arises.

Primarily using a neoclassical realist framework to analyse the strategic direction for Indonesia's foreign policy, this paper assesses whether recent developments early in the term of President Prabowo Subianto represent a substantive shift in Jakarta's long-standing use of a hedging strategy, or whether they are mere tactical adjustments, consistent within an existing strategic paradigm. To achieve this, the paper employs a qualitative case study methodology. Primary sources include government statements, memoranda of understanding and official policy documents, whereas secondary sources consist of academic literature, think-tank reports and journalistic accounts from credible outlets. The paper is presented thematically, starting with a review of Indonesia's evolving relations with China and the United States, followed by an analysis of BRICS+ membership and efforts towards de-dollarisation, and concluding with an assessment of shifting civil-military relations.

Where Prabowo's approach differs from Jokowi's, and where it deviates from traditional practices in Jakarta, can be discerned right from the very beginning of his administration: in his selection of foreign minister. To fill this important position, Prabowo chose a relative neophyte in Sugiono. Unlike his predecessor, the highly experienced Retno Marsudi, Sugiono has not had a long and distinguished diplomatic career, but is seen as unproven on the country's foreign policy agendas. As a result, there are concerns about Sugiono's ability to handle some of the more challenging regional and global issues he will be faced with moving forward, as Indonesia has not had a foreign minister this green since the days of former President Alwi Shihab in the late 1990s. Thus, it seems that in Sugiono, Prabowo may have chosen a sock puppet content with following orders without having strong convictions of his own on how to steer the foreign affairs portfolio. Moreover, this also speaks to Prabowo's leadership style, which may reflect the top-down, hierarchical nature of an armed forces' chain of command, inculcated during his long and storied military career (Gozali & Pashya, 2025).

2. Grey-zone tensions in the North Natuna Sea

Events in the North Natuna Sea have long been a sticking point standing in the way of ameliorating relations between Jakarta and Beijing. For one thing, while Beijing's claims to the area are predicated on its sweeping assertions of ownership over everything contained within its expansive "nine-dash line" – a segmented line drawn on a 1947 map that delineates almost the entirety of the South China Sea (SCS) – Jakarta's claims over the North Natuna Sea are more in line with international law, namely the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which stipulates that coastal states shall enjoy an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extending up to 200 nautical miles from their baselines. The North Natuna Sea falls squarely within this EEZ boundary, as measured from the Natuna Islands, which lends credence to the Indonesian claim, predicated as it is upon international law.

In 2016 and 2017, the area began attracting unwanted attention from China, primarily in the form of illegal fishery operations being conducted by the Chinese fishing fleet – which Beijing has deputised and controls as a means of exerting its geopolitical will as a de facto paramilitary force known as the Maritime Militia. The fleet, often accompanied by the Chinese Coast Guard, would instigate confrontations and effect a show of force as a means of effectively occupying maritime territories using the "cabbage strategy" that has proved so useful in allowing Beijing to wrest control over the rest of the South China Sea.

The so-called cabbage strategy is one of the techniques used by China in its grey zone warfare against its neighbours, in which (as per the similar "salami slicing" tactics) each move conducted by the PRC remains just slightly below the threshold of constituting a *casus belli*, yet it produces incremental movement towards Beijing's strategic objective and, over time, allows China to claim victory over the territory in question, all without firing a shot. The cabbage strategy, in particular, is a territorial strategy employed by the PRC to assume control over disputed islands by encircling them with multiple layers of assets, like the layered leaves of a cabbage. The inner layer, and the first to arrive, are often the fishing vessels – really, the Maritime Militia – to establish an ostensible civilian presence that demands protection from the next layer: the China Coast Guard, symbolically claiming the area as Chinese territory. The outer layer, there to provide firepower in the event that the target country's forces should choose to defend their islands, is the Chinese Navy (Konishi, 2022).

Not only does this strategy block the target country's vessels from entering the area to resupply their forces and citizens, it creates a de facto Chinese presence that is difficult or impossible to expel without it escalating into a full kinetic conflict. To the foreign media, it appears as though China is only protecting its civilian fishing fleet in the face of other countries' navies and coast guards, whereas it is a preplanned manoeuvre to reinforce PRC control, as well as to provide cover for other, questionably legal activities. Using this strategy, China had effectively established full control over several of the Spratly features by the end of 2015 (Suorsa, 2020).

China has used the strategy successfully in the past to take territory away from smaller nations. Examples include the PRC annexation of Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in 2012, and

parts of the aforementioned Spratly Islands from Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia during the 2010s. Moreover, while Beijing officially concedes that the Natuna Islands and the seas around them belong to Indonesia, it nonetheless began employing these same tactics in the North Natuna Sea in 2016–2017, with Chinese fishing fleets and Coast Guard support vessels making incursions into Indonesia's EEZ. In March 2016, the situation came to a head when the Chinese fishing vessel *Kway Fey* was found operating illegally in Indonesian waters off the Natuna Islands. Members of a special task force vessel operated by the Indonesian Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries detained the captain and crew and began towing the ship into harbour when a Chinese Coast Guard ship intervened by intentionally ramming the *Kway Fey* to free it from the tow cable, while leaving its crew in the hands of Indonesia, to be haggled over later by diplomats. Prior to this occurrence, similar incidents in the past had largely been de-emphasised by the Indonesian government, or swept under the rug. This one, however, appears to have precipitated rethinking in Jakarta about the best way to deal with China's assaults on Indonesian sovereign territory (Cochrane, 2016).

To demonstrate national fortitude and further assert sovereignty over the area, in 2016 Jakarta adopted a strict maritime enforcement policy under which Indonesian forces began blowing up and sinking Chinese and other foreign fishing boats caught poaching in their waters. Jakarta also began deploying warships to the Natuna Islands in greater numbers and started loudly and proudly conducting military exercises in the area. The following year, in 2017, Indonesia officially renamed the northern part of its EEZ the North Natuna Sea, to distinguish the area from the rest of the South China Sea and to reinforce Indonesian sovereignty against Chinese claims. In the eyes of Jakarta, the ruling by the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) rejecting China's history-based claims gave it the right under international law to take a harder defensive position, and to strengthen its naval presence in the area. This is notwithstanding the fact that Beijing rejected the PCA ruling while Manila, which launched the legal challenge, had all but abandoned its PCA victory under then-Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's pivot to a pro-China policy (Amalia et al., 2020; Strangio, 2024b).

Enter President Prabowo. In his state visit to China in November 2024, delegates from the two nations issued a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on support for joint maritime development in areas of overlapping claims. According to the agreement, an Inter-Governmental Joint Steering Committee would be set up to promote cooperation in the contested maritime areas of the North Natuna Sea in such areas as fisheries, conservation of fish stocks and possibly other maritime resources. Not unexpectedly, the joint statement raised concerns back home, with Indonesian hardliners worried that it was tantamount to giving away Indonesian sovereignty. Even the acknowledgement that there are "overlapping claims" made Indonesia, the first member nation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), implicitly legitimise the nine-dash line². Moreover, it represented a contradiction of long-standing policy that portended a disastrous impact on Indonesia's sovereignty

² In September 2023, the PRC updated its official map to add a tenth dash to its longstanding nine-dash line, which it uses as justification for its claims over more than 90 per cent of the SCS. The new "ten-dash line" is designed to incorporate Taiwan into its already expansive claims (Singh, 2023).

over the Natuna Islands and the country's EEZ waters by implicitly legitimising China's SCS claims, it has been argued. The Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs backtracked, quickly issuing a clarification that paid lip service to international law, UNCLOS, and Jakarta's official refutation of the nine-dash line (Gozali & Pashya, 2025; Strangio, 2024a; Martinus, 2025).

Does this suggest a shift in Indonesia's foreign relations further into China's orbit? There are factors supporting such an analysis. For one, the same state visit that led to the joint statement also netted Indonesia a USD 10 billion Chinese investment pledge, speaking to the strong and growing economic partnership between Jakarta and Beijing. Indeed: China continues to be Indonesia's largest investor and trading partner, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) contributions to developing Indonesia's infrastructure. The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway stands as a model for the ambitious BRI effort. Completed in 2023 at a cost of USD 6 billion, the railway is hailed by Beijing as one of BRI's greatest successes, with Chinese investments in Indonesian infrastructure skyrocketing in recent years, reaching USD 8.6 billion in late 2023, up from just USD 280 million in 2013. Further development projects are underway, such as port expansions in Sumatra and Sulawesi, and BRI aid in the construction of Indonesia's new capital, Nusantara. Several other BRI plans have been implemented, such as the Morowali Industrial Park in Central Sulawesi, which has made Indonesia the world's second-largest stainless steel producer. Others still under construction include the Kayan River Hydropower Project in Tanah Kuning, North Kalimantan, and the "Two Countries, Twin Parks" concept. In all, Chinese investment in Indonesia reached USD 9.3 billion in 2024 (Wang, 2025).

China's relationship with Indonesia has been called a resource-driven alliance, largely thanks to Indonesia's thriving nickel mining industry. China's demand for the metal – essential in driving its globally strategic battery and electric vehicle industries – has led to a 73 per cent increase in Indonesia's nickel exports. As of 2023, Chinese firms were in control of a reported 75 per cent of Indonesia's nickel refining industry, primarily through companies such as Tsingshan Holding Group and Jiangsu Delong Nickel Industry Co. Ltd. With its USD 24 billion trade deficit with China as of 2023, however, there is a concern that Indonesia may be exposing itself to potential leveraging by the regional giant (Grant, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

Moreover, this comes at a time when the regional balance of power is shifting, with the growth of China's influence in Southeast Asia and the continued decline of that of America. It is perhaps not surprising that Prabowo would view closer cooperation with the PRC as a means of staving off confrontation with the aspiring superpower. Malaysia and the Philippines have likewise opened the door to talk of joint resource development with China, suggesting that Prabowo's move is not an isolated incident but a budding regional trend.

Still, it is early days, and the analyst would be well reminded not to forget Jakarta's long history of balancing relations with major competing powers, and its longstanding tradition of maintaining its foreign policy independence by not fully aligning with any major power at any particular time, but rather playing them off against one another. It must also be mentioned that President Prabowo has also engaged with the United States to nurture defence ties with the region's primary security guarantor. In his November 2024 meeting with then-US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin in

Washington, the men discussed enhancing interoperability between their respective armed forces and expanding bilateral and multilateral exercises, such as the annual Super Garuda Shield. They also took the occasion to establish the U.S.-Indonesia Defense Alumni Association, designed to promote military-to-military exchanges and boost people-to-people ties among the two countries' defence establishments (Federal Newswire, 2024). Altogether, it would appear that Prabowo's seeming overtures to China may just be attempts to retain some measure of diplomatic flexibility, consistent with an approach driven by strategic pragmatism, rather than an outright shift into Beijing's orbit (Suryadinata, 2024).

3. Joining the BRICS club

Another indication that Indonesian foreign policy under Prabowo may be inching closer towards China was the news that Jakarta had officially become a full member of BRICS (now being rebranded as "BRICS+") on 6 January 2025, making it the first Southeast Asian country to join the bloc of so-called developing nations, originally consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. To understand the implications of this move – beyond the usual surface-level pronouncements about Indonesia's growing role in global issues and its desire to strengthen cooperation with other developing countries through multilateral organisations – it is worth examining not just what BRICS is, but what role it plays for its most influential members, namely Russia and China.

At its August 2023 meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa, the members of the bloc agreed to swell their ranks though the admission of countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Ethiopia, Egypt, Argentina and the United Arab Emirates. The move was widely interpreted as an acceleration of the grouping's attempts to serve as a counterweight to the West, as well as a step towards the PRC's ultimate goal of reworking the international rules-based order – an order that Beijing sees as increasingly out of date, and not at all to its liking (Patrick, 2024).

"We have consensus on the first phase of this expansion process and other phases will follow," announced South African President Cyril Ramaphosa during the leaders' summit. Indeed, scores of countries have expressed an interest in joining the organisation in the hopes of benefiting from development finance schemes untethered from the stipulations normally imposed by traditional Western lenders. In addition to Indonesia, the listed nations included Algeria, Bolivia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Cuba, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Comoros, Gabon and Kazakhstan (du Plessis et al., 2023).

The PRC has an outsized influence within BRICS, and is seeking to wield the multilateral institution as a counterpoint to the Western-led global order (Sarpong & Sibiri, 2024). It does this in the economic sphere in much the same way as it does with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the security realm. While many member nations, particularly Brazil and India, merely seek to temper the West's unipolar lock on power by supporting the rise of a multipolar world order, China appears to be moulding it into an organisation dedicated to weakening the West and paving the way for the PRC to supplant the United States as global superpower. In this sense, the strategy deviates

little from the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) longtime go-to strategy: the united front ploy of forming temporary alliances of convenience in order to achieve a political or military aim of Beijing (Brady, 2003).

Another, more immediate reason for the expansion of the bloc is to aid in Russia's efforts to sidestep Western-led sanctions imposed after Moscow's unprovoked invasion and ongoing war in Ukraine, as well as helping to sanction-proof China's own economy in the event that similar injunctions are imposed in response to an attack or blockade by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) against Taiwan – an eventuality that appears increasingly more likely following the precedent set by Russia (Fravel, 2023). This invasion, along with the PRC's declaration of a “no-limits strategic partnership” with Russia in February 2022, indicates that the Beijing-Moscow alliance is a unified front in the developing “Cold War 2.0” against the West. This is particularly evident in China's backing of Russia's proxy conflict with the United States, not only by offering diplomatic support but also by supplying military equipment and technology (Eran & Magen, 2022).

This recent effort to expand Beijing's influence among the Global South is a methodological extension of the Beijing Consensus: a term coined in 2004 to describe the PRC's exportation of its model of authoritarianism and heavy state involvement in the economy through the provision of development funding schemes overseas. The Beijing Consensus is presented as an alternative to the Western model – known as the “Washington Consensus”, of tying development funding to neoliberal and market-oriented doctrines (Williamson, 2012).

One of Beijing's most urgent endeavours in achieving this goal is to promote de-dollarisation of the global economy: essentially a reduction in the role of the US dollar in global trade and financial transactions, especially among those nations that see America in decline and China in the ascendant. These countries made themselves known when the United States placed sanctions on Russia in retaliation for its attack on Ukraine. India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Brazil, the United Arab Emirates, Mexico and others ignored the US call for sanctions and maintained (and, in some cases, expanded) their trade relations with Russia. This widespread reticence to join the US effort to sanction Russian companies and oligarchs was a signal to China that America's influence in international circles is indeed waning, and that the PRC's moment to present itself to the world as an ideological and geopolitical alternative is near. Indeed: CCP Chairman Xi Jinping wasted no time in throwing his support behind Russian President Vladimir Putin, and declaring their respective countries' “no-limits” partnership (Saaida, 2024; Gouvea & Gutierrez, 2023).

The primacy of the US dollar in global trade and financial markets has irked Beijing for at least a generation. The practice goes back to 1921, and was only cemented in 1947 when the Bretton Woods Agreement reinforced the greenback's position as the global currency reserve. A 1973 agreement between OPEC, Saudi Arabia and the United States to buy and sell oil exclusively in “petrodollars”, as well as Western control of financial channels such as the SWIFT system, strengthened the dominance of the US dollar. This puts China at a disadvantage, and while the renminbi (RMB) is no longer pegged to the dollar, the People's Bank of China only allows it to float within a narrow band, amounting to what Washington considers currency manipulation (Malik & Naz, 2022).

Now, however, the failed US attempt to establish a willing coalition of countries to enforce a regime of Russian sanctions has revealed the extent to which many in the community of nations share Beijing's view that the dollar's hegemony is no longer in their interests, and the CCP is taking advantage of this moment to propose a degree of de-dollarisation that would have been unthinkable just a decade ago – back when Beijing began, in earnest, to push its trading partners to use the yuan, setting up RMB trading centres in Europe and Asia. Since that time, the PRC has successfully lobbied for the yuan to be added to the IMF's portfolio of international currencies, and is now seeking to do the same with the Belgium-based SWIFT system. China is also a pioneer in the implementation of a digital currency, which, if adopted, would represent a quantum leap forward in this effort (Wei, 2025).

The induction of oil-producing powerhouses to the BRICS+ alliance represents a major step forward in the de-dollarisation effort. Beijing eyes control over the global oil markets – a non-traditional security imperative given China's position as the world's largest net importer of petroleum and other liquid fuels – by pushing BRICS+ nations to switch to using local currencies rather than the US dollar for trade settlements. The effort is attractive not only to leaders in Beijing and Moscow, but also to those in a great many developing countries as they seek to strengthen their local currencies. There are certain economic risks to this strategy, however. US President Donald Trump, early in his second administration, announced the intention to impose high tariffs on BRICS+ members, as Washington is not ignorant of the group's apparent opposition to the US dollar's continued dominance. This is something Prabowo will seek to avoid (Dsouza, 2023; Gozali & Pashya, 2025).

To be fair, the United States is itself responsible, at least in part, for growing mistrust of the dollar's supremacy. First, US leaders of recent years have had an itchy trigger finger when imposing sanctions and other measures for restricting access to the global financial system for nations, companies and individuals with whom US politicians disagree. Second, Washington has been quick to freeze bank accounts and seize the foreign assets of such individuals without due process. Third, the US-led expulsion of Russia and Russians from the SWIFT system has raised fears in several other countries that the same could all too easily happen to them. It is therefore no surprise that Prabowo would seek to decrease his economy's reliance on the US dollar.

In terms of whether this will prove to be an attractive avenue for Indonesia's foreign policy, Prabowo has thus far spurred measures that align with broader de-dollarisation trends. For example, in January 2025, Indonesia and India agreed to use their local currencies – the Indonesian rupiah and the Indian rupee – for bilateral trade, essentially cutting out the US dollar as the middle man (Shofa, 2025). On the domestic front, Prabowo is also seeking to reduce his economy's dependence on foreign currencies by increasing Indonesia's foreign exchange reserves by a targeted USD 80 billion, to be achieved through the February 2025 enactment of legislation requiring the mining sector and other exporters of natural resources (except for oil and gas) to keep all proceeds of their exports within the country for a year or more. Speaking in a televised press conference, Prabowo asserted that, “Indonesia's natural resources must benefit the welfare of the nation and the people, through development funding, the circular flow of money domestically, increase in foreign

exchange reserves and stability of the exchange rate” (Reuters, 2025; Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025).

In sum, while President Prabowo’s embrace of BRICS+ membership and his active pursuit of policies designed to lower Indonesia’s reliance on the US dollar hint at a geopolitical shift towards China, or at least an embrace of the PRC world view, he is no doubt aware that, whatever it started out as, BRICS has become a revisionist organisation with the express purpose of serving the interests of Russia and, in particular, China. He is therefore treading cautiously on the issue of de-dollarisation, and avoiding committing his economy to a full alignment with Beijing (Bordachev, 2023).

4. Weak defence ties with China

The weak link in Indonesia’s relations with China is not the economic and trade relationship, but lies in the area of defence. In the past five years, Jakarta has boosted defence cooperation with other countries, including, most notably, its Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with Australia. Signed in August 2024, the DCA essentially amounts to a status-of-forces agreement, allowing foreign forces to be stationed on Indonesian territory. It has also in that time made inroads into furthering its defence ties with America, largely spurred by the PLA’s increasing (and increasingly hostile) presence in the region. While not explicitly seeking to counterbalance China in the evolving cold war brewing in the region between Beijing and Washington, this period saw the adoption by Jakarta of what more or less operated as a position of impartiality. This *Bebas dan Aktif* strategy is essentially a hedging approach (Nathania & Kusumasomantri, 2025).

Prabowo, moreover, was seen as a hard-nosed general in the military, and as defence minister was perceived as being tough on China. It is therefore an unexpected turn of events to witness the growing multifaceted relationship between the two countries – a relationship that is simultaneously characterised by a degree of cooperation as well as underlying tensions. Prabowo has adopted a pragmatic approach to this area of foreign policy, taking part in high-level meetings and other strategic engagements, such as the decision to go to China for his first official overseas trip as president. During this visit, he and General Secretary Xi Jinping vowed to make security the “fifth pillar” of cooperation between their two countries; the other four being political, economic, maritime and people-to-people exchanges. It was at this meeting that the aforementioned controversial MOU on joint maritime development was inked.

Conversely, in the areas of arms procurement and deepening military-to-military ties, there has been a guarded approach. This aspect of the Indonesia-China relationship perhaps best represents the tightrope that Prabowo must walk: on the one hand, his ascension to the presidency would not have been possible were it not for the efforts of a political coalition made up of powerful business interests with an eye on expanding Indonesia’s economic relationship with China. On the other hand, there is deep mistrust of the CCP and a pervasive anti-communist legacy that reaches the core of the

Indonesian military establishment, which continues to advocate for caution in any dealings with the PLA (Laksmana, 2024).

Despite the 2005 inauguration of a new era in Indonesia’s defence ties with China, dubbed a “strategic partnership”, little real progress has been made in developing this relationship in the two decades since. Beijing bears the lion’s share of the blame for this, given its overtly hostile behaviour in the South China Sea in general, and what has, since then (and as a result of this poor behaviour), come to be known as the North Natuna Sea. Indonesia, like many of the countries with SCS beachfront property, continues to rely on the West, and primarily the United States, for its military development and its overall security. This is despite the fact that, according to a 2017 report by the US National Defense University, Indonesia was one of the PRC’s top ten military diplomatic partners between 2003 and 2016 (Allen et al., 2017).

For example, in 2009, PLA schools hosted more than three dozen Indonesian officers on educational exchanges, whereas that number has dwindled to a third in the past decade, according to research by Evan Laksmana (2024) of the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Meanwhile, the US armed forces have hosted more than 7,300 Indonesian officers and men in military training programmes over a similar time frame. Likewise with joint military drills: the Indonesian armed forces conducted just four military exercises with the PLA between 2003 and 2022, whereas they took part in over a hundred with US forces during those years.

Looking at the causes for this tepid interest in military ties with China, Laksmana (2024) cites the language issue: there is little interest in learning Mandarin among Indonesian officers. For one thing, such a proficiency is not seen as being conducive to booming career prospects and promotions in a military with such a strong institutional history of anti-communism. Indeed: China’s maritime assertiveness in the South China Sea caused the Indonesian authorities to cancel a planned bilateral special forces exercise with China in 2015, known as “Sharp Knife”, citing the lack of operational compatibility between the two forces and, more to the point, strategic mistrust.

Exacerbating this situation is Indonesia’s poor experience with Chinese military equipment, which has led to both lethal and non-lethal incidents in the past. Also in 2015, for example, a Chinese-made Type 90B 35 mm anti-aircraft cannon misfired during a military exercise in the Natuna Islands, causing an explosion that killed four Indonesian soldiers and injured eight others. The following year saw several incidents transpire in Indonesia’s EEZ, in which the Indonesian Navy faced off against vessels of the Chinese Maritime Militia, showing that Beijing had no interest in toning down its maritime assertiveness in the interests of forging closer ties with Jakarta (Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020).

5. Shift in civil-military relations

Another important question is: what are the prospects for Prabowo’s balancing act between Washington and Beijing within the context of an increased level of military influence in governance that was previously civilian-dominated? President Prabowo is ushering in a new era of civil-military

relations in Indonesia, with a larger role for the military in administrative affairs, prompting some commentators to caution against the potential for democratic backsliding of the sort seen during Suharto's "New Order" regime, when the military was allowed to assume control over various aspects of national governance and suppress dissent according to the doctrine of *dwifungsi*, or "dual function". In this context, "dual" refers to the military's twofold role: not only serving a defensive function but also engaging in policymaking and supporting Suharto's authoritarian rule (Sebastian et al., 2018).

Prabowo laid the legal foundations for this move with revisions to the country's military law – revisions that were recently passed by the country's parliament – that will allow Army officers to occupy government posts previously designated for civilians. This has been the practice since Prabowo took office in October 2024, with active military officers filling formerly civilian positions in the Transportation and Agriculture Ministries, as well as serving as the new president's cabinet secretary (Sulaiman & Teresia, 2025).

This shift in civil-military relations is an important factor to consider in the analysis of Indonesian foreign policy going forward under Prabowo. There have been several studies to indicate that governments that are strongly influenced by military institutions tend to embark upon more aggressive, interventionist, and risk-prone foreign policies. Military officers are trained to view international disputes through a strategic and security-focused lens, as opposed to seeing them as a matter of diplomacy or economics. Researchers such as Peter Feaver (1996) and Michael Desch (2001) have studied how a strong military influence within a government may lead to a preference for armed force over diplomacy, and how military preferences in administration and policy can prevail even in the absence of an all-out coup.

In "Leaders, Advisers, and the Political Origins of Elite Support for War", Elizabeth Saunders (2018) examines the dynamics of leader-adviser interactions, and how elite cues from within a leader's circle of advisors can influence policy direction, particularly in decisions regarding the use of force. Personal military experience, Saunders finds, can shape attitudes on defence matters. Interestingly, in their exploration of this dynamic, Michael C. Horowitz and Allan C. Stam (2014) find that the leaders most likely to initiate militarised conflict are those with prior military careers, yet without any actual combat experience.

On this last point, it is worth noting that this finding does not necessarily apply to Prabowo, who was head of the Army Special Forces (Kopassus), and as a young man was deployed to East Timor in 1976 following Indonesia's invasion of that country. At 26, he was the youngest commander of the Nanggala commando unit and led the mission that resulted in the death of the first Prime Minister of East Timor, Nicolau dos Reis Lobato, on 31 December 1978. Indeed, Prabowo's military record has been the subject of controversy and even led to allegations of human rights abuse severe enough to have had him banned from visiting the United States (Campbell, 2024).

6. Conclusions

Indonesia's foreign policy under President Prabowo Subianto is at a crossroads. Pressure is being exerted not only from a traditionalist desire to maintain continuity with past strategic practices, but also from an almost seismic shift in global dynamics. Indonesia has much experience in the art of hedging between great powers, yet Prabowo's unique leadership characteristics – his assertive style, military experience and his heretofore unexpected policy choices – hint at a turn towards a policy stance that is driven by strategic pragmatism grounded in neoclassical realism. His apparent embrace of China – exemplified by booming BRI investments, BRICS+ accession and flirtation with de-dollarisation – suggests a willingness to engage the PRC in areas that could prove to be mutually beneficial. Yet, this impetus is clearly being carefully counterbalanced by ongoing and expanding defence ties with the United States and other Western partners. This reflects a clear desire to avoid entering a state of overdependence or ideological entanglement with any one power.

The Prabowo administration's handling of the North Natuna Sea issue, its openness to joint development agreements and its stance on issues of sovereignty reveal a calculated attempt to preserve diplomatic flexibility. At the same time, the domestic shift in civil-military relations, consisting of legislative reforms and the increasing presence of military officers in civilian governance, raises concerns about what the future holds for democracy in Indonesia. It also suggests that a more assertive foreign policy stance could arise in future.

In sum, Indonesia under Prabowo is not charting a radical departure from its time-honoured practice of non-alignment, but rather updating this tradition for a new era of great power competition, economic interdependence and the potential return of multipolarity to the region, and to the world. Whether Prabowo can sustain this balancing act long term without sacrificing his nation's sovereignty, strategic autonomy or domestic stability will depend on the deftness of his political navigation skills, as the erstwhile Kopassus commander endeavours to chart a course between the Scylla and Charybdis of great-power competition as regional and global superpowers vie for supremacy in a shifting and uncertain world order.

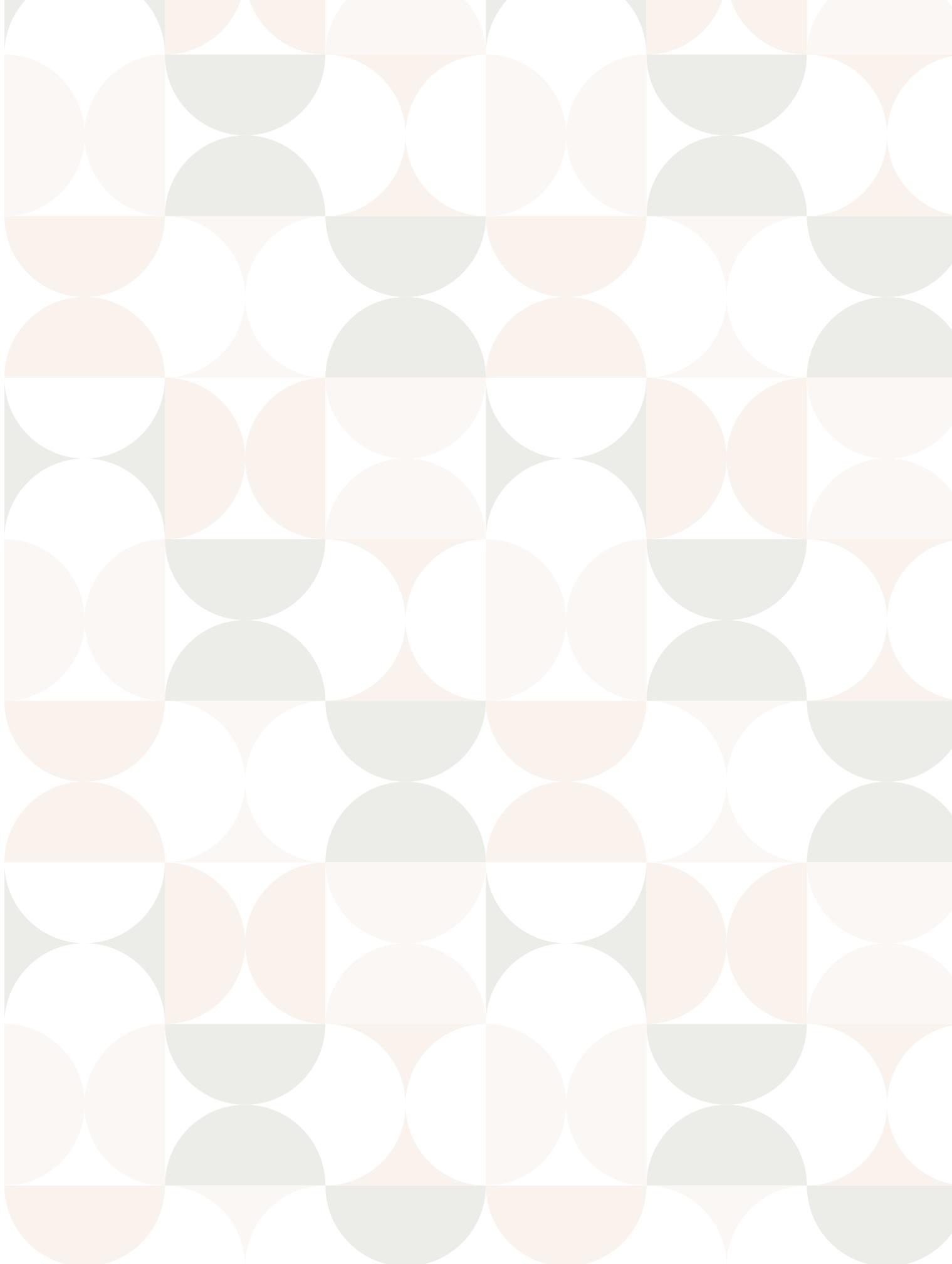
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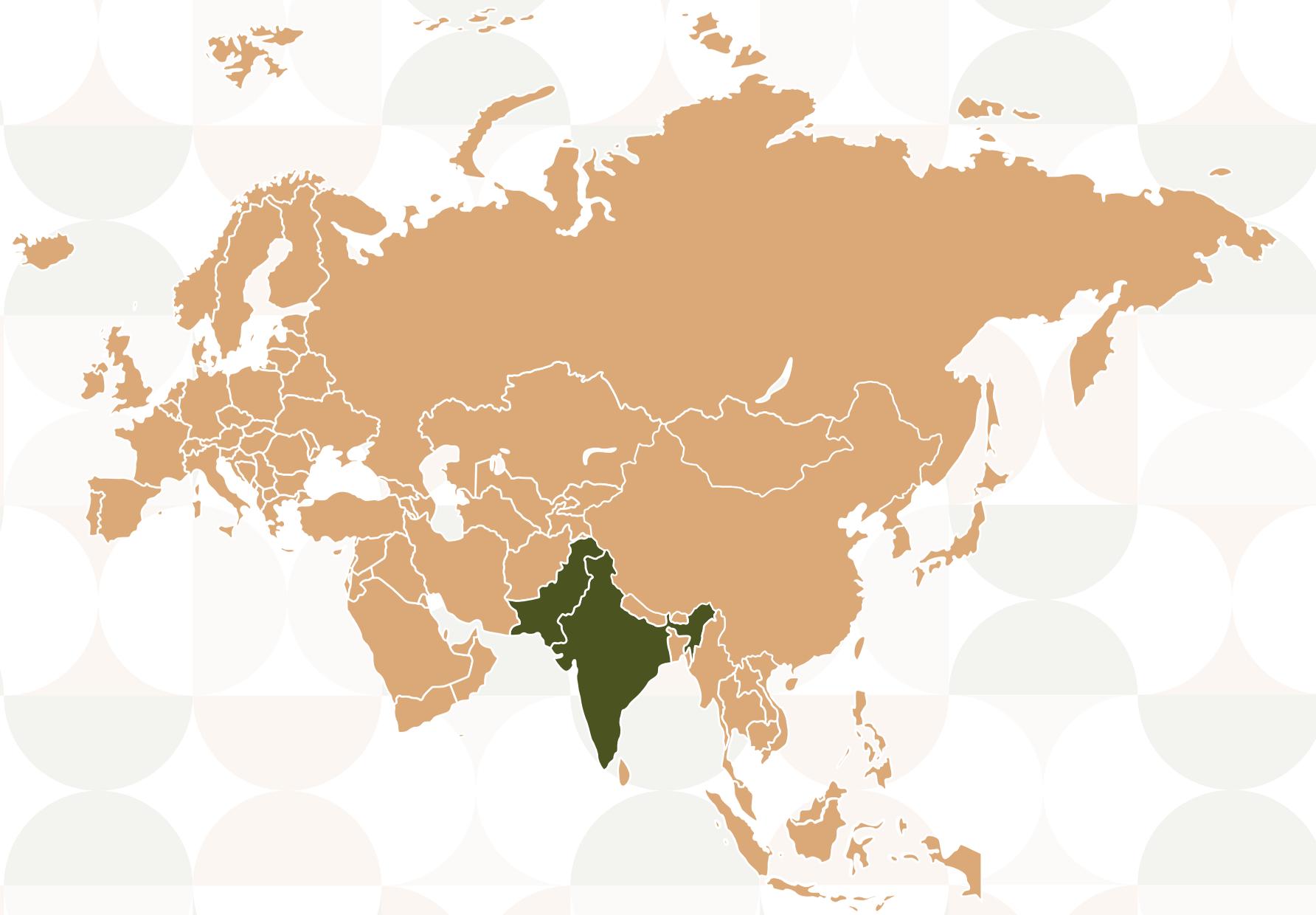
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III

**SOUTH ASIA
COLUMN**





BÉLA HÁDA

**Military Modernisation
in India and Pakistan**

MILITARY MODERNISATION IN INDIA AND PAKISTAN: TRENDS OF THE PAST DECADE¹

BÉLA HÁDA²

Abstract

Nowadays, the rise of Asian states and its effect on the global balance of power is a prioritised research topic in the field of international and security studies. Besides, armaments and military modernisation became key themes of the discussions on the future of the world order in the third decade of the 21st century. This is also true for South Asia, where India and Pakistan have the fastest modernising militaries. This paper examines the technological advancement of the Indian and Pakistani armed forces between 2014 and 2024, highlighting certain important vehicle categories. In doing so, it not only describes the quantitative changes, but also characterises the various military equipment in terms of capability using the Military Balance+ database. As a result, the paper provides a detailed picture of how a far-reaching advance has occurred in the examined vehicle categories of the Indian and Pakistani armed forces, and what further prospects this process has. This information also helps us assess how the balance of power between the two powers may develop in the near future.

Keywords: South Asia, army, Navy, Air Force, India, Pakistan, modernisation

1. Introduction

Nowadays, South Asia is one of the most important regions in terms of global armaments, which is not independent of the ongoing transformation of the world order, and, in the framework thereof, the rise of Asian powers. The seven-decades-long Indo-Pakistani conflict, however, has given the process extra impetus in the recent past. This paper examines the fundamental patterns that have characterised the armament trends of the two leading South Asian nations over the period of 2014–2024. The most important source in terms of quantitative and some qualitative information is the Military Balance+ database, supplemented by other sources. It is also important to note that our analysis does not cover all military equipment categories, as it does not aim to take over the role of annually published data collections, and also takes into account the uncertainty factor, which is very high for some equipment types and capability systems in South Asian states. Therefore, relatively easily identifiable and comparable battle tanks, armoured fighting vehicles, mobile artillery systems, fixed-wing attack aircraft, rotary-wing aircraft that can be used at least partially in an attack/combat support role, large warships and submarines constitute the groups of equipment that we will analyse within each military branch below. The status of these equipment categories is a serious indicator of the armed forces' warfare capabilities and general development. Besides, they constitute significant items in terms of procurement, so their development also reveals which manufacturers or states the given country considers important partners in guaranteeing its self-defence capabilities in the future. Similarly, the paper examines the technical level of each type of equipment based on Military Balance+, classifying them into advanced, modern, ageing, obsolescent or obsolete categories. It is important, however, that these definitions do not reflect the age (i.e. the years since their production) or usability of various assets, but rather the relative quality of their technical solutions. A type of vehicle bearing the cutting-edge developments of certain great powers can raise the standards of assets that can be classified as advanced to a very high level, while other, in some cases, newly manufactured and widely used vehicles can be pushed into the ageing category. However, this does not mean that the latter would become unusable or could not be the best in their category in the security environment of the given country. There is no doubt that the technical status of equipment is not the only factor that determines a country's ability to wage war. Training, logistics, qualities of leadership, societal support, sociocultural characteristics or hardihood of military personnel also influence the combat power of the armed forces. Therefore, this study does not show which would necessarily win a war between the two countries; it only analyses a very important component of the capabilities of their armed forces.

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2. Status of each Indian and Pakistani Armed Forces vehicle category

2.1. Indian Army

The modernisation processes of India's armoured vehicles (main battle tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, armoured personnel carriers and reconnaissance vehicles) have been hectic over the past decade. The total number of fighting vehicles included in this category increased from 4,486 in 2014 to 7,015 in 2024 (Military Balance+). However, despite the approximately 56% increase, at first glance we cannot speak of a significant rejuvenation of the fleet. To explain this phenomenon, it is first worth looking at the category in a differentiated way. Of the aforementioned quantities of vehicles, approximately 2,874 in 2014 and 3,740 in 2024 were main battle tanks (MBTs); the rest were armoured fighting vehicles (AFVs).³ The two groups of equipment have been characterised by different development trends in the past decade.

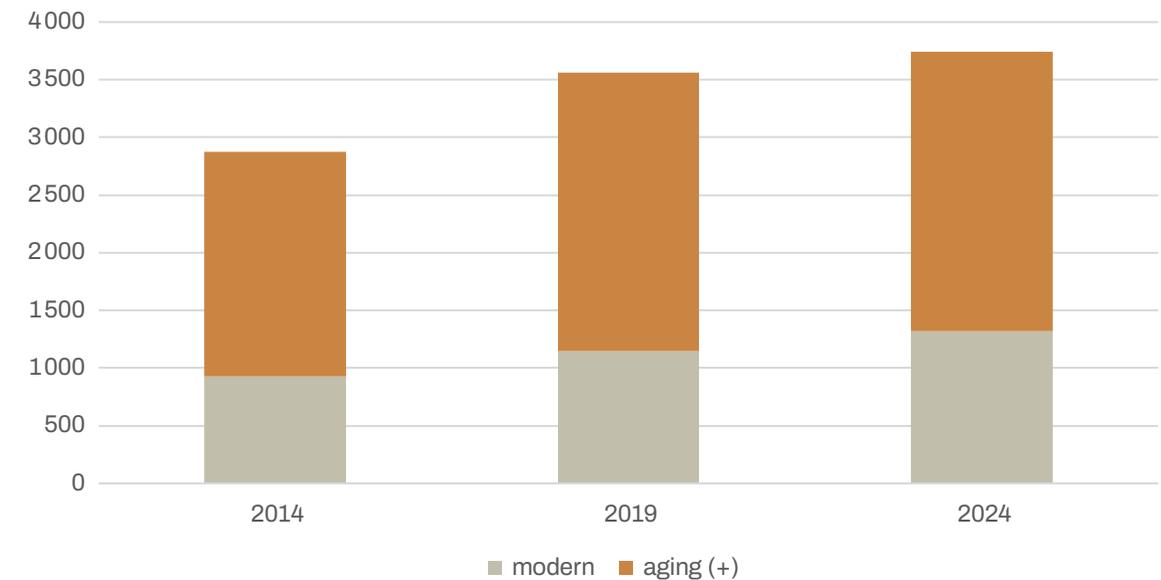
2.1.1. Tanks

The number of MBTs therefore increased by 30% during this period, but more importantly, the proportion of types considered modern increased from 32% to only 35% (Military Balance+). The remaining part is made up of the largely domestically produced T-72s, whose combat readiness is supported by a significant modernisation programme, but it is definitely an ageing type (see Figure 1). Obviously, India also perceives the need to renew its MBT fleet, but in accordance with its traditions, it intends to solve this at least partly through domestic production. Currently, the procurement of T-90S MBTs from Russia and their domestic licence production (named Bhishma) provide the tank corps with the latest equipment, which has resulted in a minor modernisation of the fighting arm. Of course, the above-mentioned ratio may seem misleading. The number of Bhishmas has actually increased by one and a half times in ten years, and since 2018, a modernised contingent of more than 450 T-72s has returned to service.

Although India would replace its ageing T-72s with new, domestically developed tanks from around 2030 (Bisht, 2023), based on currently available information, the 590 MBTs planned to be built are not enough to replace the entire T-72 fleet. As a result of the programme, it is expected that the T-90 will serve as the primary MBT type used by the Indian armoured corps. The experiences of the Russo-Ukrainian war regarding the battlefield performance of the T-90 have therefore received serious attention from Indian experts. Analysing the particular situations, they finally concluded that the type's relatively significant battlefield losses are mostly attributable to human error and not technical deficiencies. Therefore, continuing the procurement programme does not jeopardise the future combat capability of the Indian armoured corps (Bommakanti, 2022). Nevertheless, the clear objective is to produce and develop tanks domestically as much as possible, which could lead to a gradual decrease in the significance of Russian-origin assets and possibly to cooperation with other external partners.

³ The category of AFVs includes infantry fighting vehicles, armoured personnel carriers and armoured reconnaissance vehicles.

Figure 1. Number and capabilities of Indian main battle tanks in 2014, 2019, 2024



Source: Military Balance+.

2.1.2. Armoured fighting vehicles

In India, the modernisation efforts of armoured fighting vehicles are lagging behind those of MBTs. The majority of the vehicle fleet consisted of ageing (OT-64; BMP-2) or outright obsolete (BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicles and the FV701 armoured reconnaissance cars) types in 2024. The only modern equipment was the self-developed Tata Kestrel (IPMV - Infantry Protected Mobility Vehicle) armoured personnel carrier. This is one of the latest products of the Indian military industry, already in service (6), and is actually intended to replace the BMPs. Of the latter, a total of 3,112 were in service in 2024 (representing 95% of the equipment category). It is therefore worth adding a couple of thoughts on the effort to replace them. On the one hand, the Indian government has decided to modernise the AFVs not just partially, but fundamentally, which has been overdue for decades. On the other hand, if it wants to achieve this with IPMVs, it will take a significant amount of time. Therefore, not surprisingly, there are also signs that New Delhi is not completely abandoning the practice of importing proven technologies, which it can implement in partnership with other major powers. For example, there is an agreement with the United States to produce Stryker infantry carrier vehicles in India that can at least be partially fitted into this concept (Katoch, 2023). If this programme is launched, it would also mean that India would rely more on its Western partners for the modernisation of AFVs. Stryker's armour protection has generally been criticised, but it could be a promising platform for India as a fast-moving air defence platform, especially against drones (Business Standard, 2023). The plan to deploy it is often linked to increasing border preparedness against China. Besides, it is very likely that India will maintain its own national AFV development programmes.

2.1.3. Artillery systems

In terms of artillery armament, India has a very extensive and diverse inventory. In 2014, the Military Balance+ database listed 10,896 assets in this equipment category, which had started to increase slightly since 2019 and had increased to 11,117 by 2024. The vast majority of these are 105, 130 or 155 mm towed artillery weapons, which do not deserve special attention from us. Much more interesting is the category of self-propelled artillery, which has also become preferred in India in recent times. The most significant milestone in the development of Indian self-propelled artillery during the period under consideration was the commissioning of the South Korean-origin 155 mm K9 Thunder self-propelled howitzers, of which 100 were available by 2024. These modern fighting vehicles, partly assembled in India (under the name Vajra T), have brought significant improvement in the quality of the Indian self-propelled artillery forces, which are considered obsolete in terms of their other equipment. At the same time, the Indian Army also decommissioned its last M46 Catapult self-propelled artillery guns, which had been in service since the early 1980s and were now considered highly obsolete.

Another interesting development direction, dating back to the 1990s, was the construction of self-propelled mortars, which were developed using the BMP 2 chassis and existing 120 mm mortars as part of that known as the CMT (Carrier Mortar Tracked) programme. The result of this is considered fundamentally obsolete due to the components used, and the exact number of vehicles in service is unknown.

In addition to barrel artillery, it is also worth paying attention to the status of Indian rocket artillery. The vast majority of India's multiple rocket launchers are BM-21 Grads left over from the Cold War, of which approximately 150 were in service throughout the period under review (Military Balance+). Nowadays, they are considered outdated, although still widely used, assets. However, somewhat newer types have also appeared alongside them. 36 Pinaka multiple rocket launchers (a domestically developed system with a longer firing range than the Grad) were in service in 2024. The Pinakas can be considered a likely replacement for the Grads, and the system's capabilities are expected to be expanded in the coming years, with which the Indian side intends to improve its artillery strike capabilities against its Chinese rival (ArmyRecognition, 2023). At the same time, 42 of the longer-range 9A52 Smerch multiple rocket launchers were in service in India during the period under examination (Military Balance+).

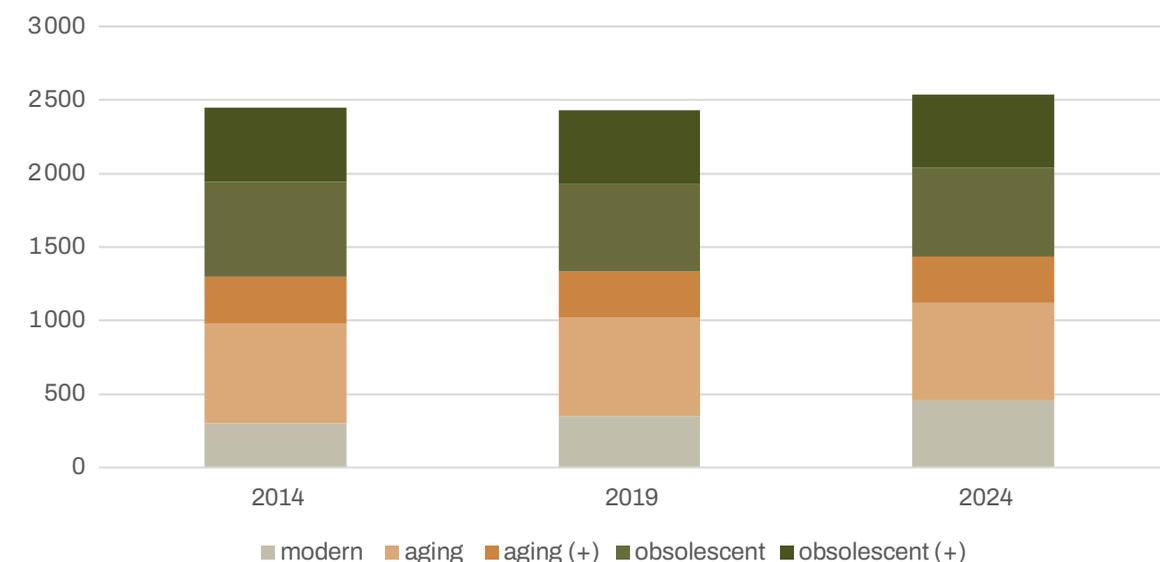
2.2. Pakistan Army

In 2024, Pakistan had a total of 5,902 armoured vehicles in service, compared to 3,871 in 2014 (Hackett, 2014, 270; Military Balance+). Of these, 2,501 were MBTs in 2014, and 2,537 in 2024, which represents an increase of less than 1.5% in a decade. At the same time, the number of vehicles that can be classified as modern has increased by more than 51% during this period.

2.2.1. Tanks

The largest part of the tank fleet was represented by a total of 1,100 ZTZ-59s (a Chinese-made version of the T-54) and Al-Zarrar (a significantly upgraded version of the former), which were already considered ageing vehicles at the beginning of the period under consideration. By 2025, however, at least 51 of the oldest T-54s had been decommissioned. The number of Chinese-made ZTZ-69, ZTZ-85 and Ukrainian-made T-80 UD tanks, which are also ageing vehicles but still usable, has decreased somewhat over the past decade. The largest reduction was in the number of ZTZ-69s, of which 132 were dismantled and handed over to paramilitary forces. Back in 2017, the Pakistani ground forces began supplementing their 300-strong MBT-2000 (Al-Khalid) tank fleet, which was the most modern of its kind until then, with the upgraded Al-Khalid I variants. Of the latter, approximately 110 were in service by 2024. The procurement of Chinese-made MBT-3000 (VT-4) tanks began in 2020. By 2024, 44 of these were in service with the Pakistani armoured corps (see Figure 2). These three types form the modern MBT fleet of the Pakistani ground forces, so we can say that the technical image of the fighting arm started to undergo a marked improvement in 2017.

Figure 2. Number and capabilities of Pakistani main battle tanks in 2014, 2019, 2024



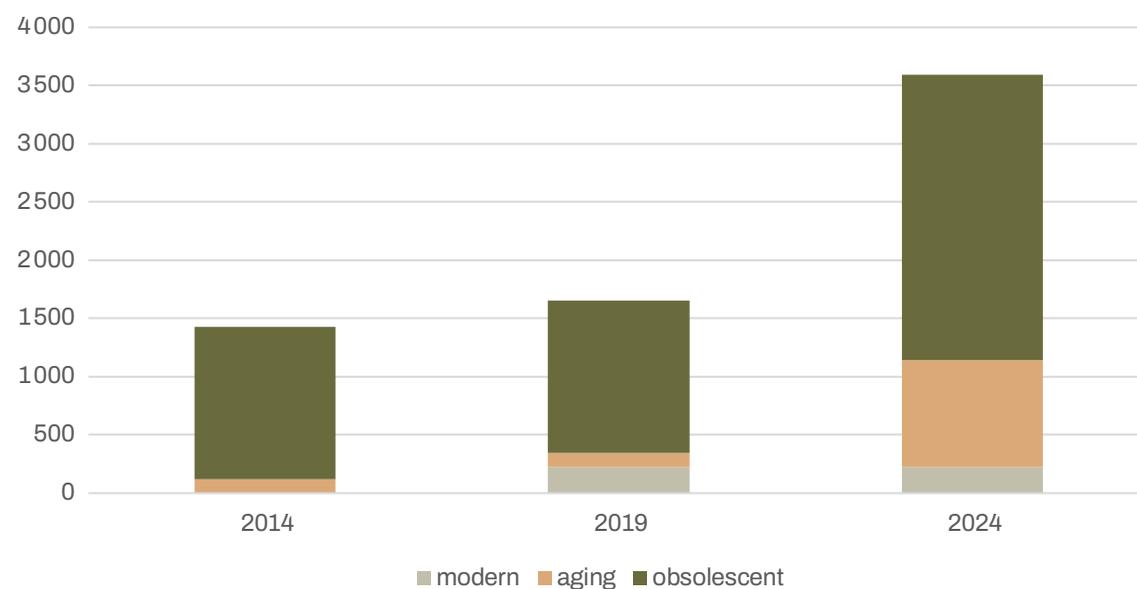
Source: Military Balance+.

2.2.2. Armoured fighting vehicles

In the case of the category of AFVs, we can also observe a significant modernisation endeavour on the part of Pakistan, even if, in parallel, a high number of vehicles that could otherwise be classified as obsolescent have also entered into service over the past decade. As a result, the less modern types still remain, with an overwhelming predominance of 68%. However, if we consider that the share of

obsolescent equipment was almost 92% in 2014, the process can be assessed much more favourably. Pakistan's armoured fighting vehicles predominantly represent technological concepts born during the Cold War period, but the sources of procurement show significant diversity. The Pakistani ground forces also use vehicles of Chinese (ZSD-63), Soviet (BTR-70; BTR-80), US (M113, Maxxpro) and German (UR-416) origin. Interestingly, a slightly redesigned version of the American M113 armoured personnel carrier was introduced as a self-produced vehicle under the name Talha, and slightly modernised Italian versions of the same fighting vehicle (VCC-1; VCC-2) have also been in service since 2019 (Military Balance+). The latter three versions, however, represent the "ageing" types of the otherwise highly obsolescent fleet and are not suitable for a spectacular increase in technical level. However, it should be noted that there has been a significant increase of more than 150% in the number of vehicles in the last decade (see Figure 3). Two sources of the latter can be identified. On the one hand, the procurement of American-made MaxxPros had begun after 2014, introducing a new, more modern family of equipment to the Pakistan Armed Forces (Defencetalk, 2017). On the other hand, the above-mentioned more or less improved versions of the M113 were gradually introduced into service in the late 2010s, as a result of which the number of different versions of the M113 in the Army's arsenal more than doubled (Hackett, 2014; Hackett, 2019; Hackett, 2024). The development trends of the vehicle category in the period under examination were therefore determined by procurements that have already been proven in live conditions and/or for which significant local experience is available in their operation. In addition, although to a more modest extent than MBTs, an effort to exploit domestic production opportunities can also be observed.

Figure 3. Number and capabilities of Pakistani armoured fighting vehicles in 2014, 2019, 2024



Source: Military Balance+.

2.2.3. Artillery systems

The number of Pakistan's artillery weapons was approximately 4,472 in 2014, which increased by a little over 3% to 4,619 by 2024 (Military Balance+). Of these, several thousand are older American, Chinese and a total of less than 150 Turkish (Panther) and Serbian (M 56) artillery guns and howitzers, as well as mortars. What really deserves our attention is the remaining part, first and foremost the self-propelled howitzers. During the period under review, the most significant development for the Pakistani self-propelled artillery, which was previously equipped with obsolescent and ageing assets, was the acquisition of modern Chinese-made PCL-181 (SH-15) self-propelled howitzers. 54 (according to other sources, 56) of the 155 mm truck-mounted howitzers entered into service from 2022 (Kajal, 2023). Pakistan decided to purchase these in response to the reinforcement of Indian self-propelled artillery with K9s. It is also interesting that the Chinese equipment arrived in a fighting arm that had previously been determined by the use of American technology. In practice, this meant an uncertain number of the obsolescent M110 and approximately 438 of various variants of the ageing M109 in 2024. Of the latter, 123 were the M109L version, produced and upgraded in Italy, which have been in service with the Pakistani ground forces since 2019 (Defense Mirror, 2019). Islamabad would also place emphasis on developing its own manufacturing capabilities in the future, which can also be achieved most easily in cooperation with China. In the long term, this could result in American military technology losing ground to Chinese hardware in the Islamic Republic.

In terms of multiple rocket launchers, Pakistan mostly has copies of the Soviet Grad system, some of which it has produced itself. More than 52 Chinese PHL-81s (some of which were assembled domestically under the name Azar) and an unknown number of KRL-122 Ghazabs, also produced in Pakistan, belong to this category. In addition, 35 Chinese-designed A100 multiple rocket launchers formed this group of equipment for the Islamic Republic's ground forces during the period under consideration. The latter are the relatively most modern among similar weapon systems in Pakistani service and are partly domestically produced.

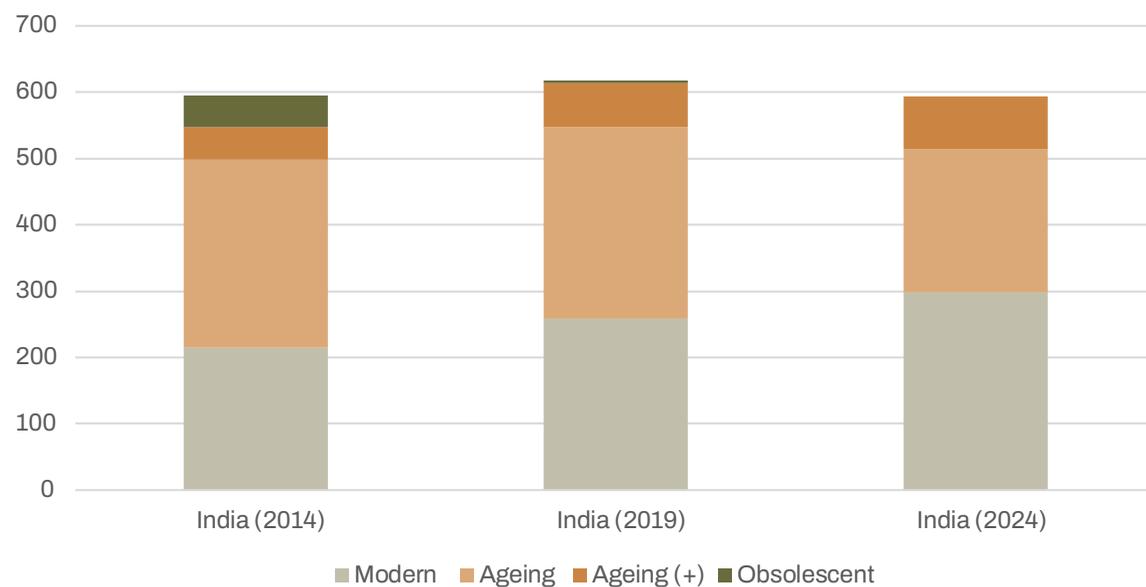
2.3. Indian Air Force

2.3.1. Fighters

The number of India's fixed-wing attack aircraft (excluding naval aircraft) did not show any significant changes in the period under examination, but their modernisation was continuous. The fighter fleet, which consisted of 658 aircraft in 2014, increased to 673 by 2024. But within this, the proportion of modern fighters increased from 33% to 44%. Obsolescent aircraft have been steadily decreasing in number and proportion. The number of the various types of MiG-21s, which are the most outdated fighter jets in the service branch, had decreased to around 40 by 2024 from 257 in 2014 (Military Balance+). Their days are certainly numbered as their operational lifespan is nearing its end. The modernisation plan of the Indian Air Force has been based on the urgent replacement of these ageing vehicles since the beginning of the period under review. In 2014, India had only one type of fighter aircraft that could be considered modern, the Su-30 MKI, of which it operated 215

at the time. Some of these were assembled domestically under licence, and it was decided to expand the aircraft fleet with additional, partly domestically produced fighters in view of the Chinese threat (Nikolov, 2023). These therefore constituted the aforementioned 33% of the modern part of the Air Force. The number of Su-30s was already 262 in 2024, supplemented by 36 Rafale fighter jets, which India ordered in 2016 (Majumdar, 2021). However, the number of MiG-29s in service remained unchanged during the period under consideration (55-54), even though it is a decidedly ageing type (see Figure 4). This is not surprising, considering that the development process has proven to be much slower than planned. It is worth remembering that the idea leading to the Rafale deal was to procure 126 multi-role fighters. A regular problem in India is that the implementation of the announced development plans leaves much to be desired in terms of both meeting the time frame and qualitative or quantitative indicators. However, over the past decade and a half, the stakes have not only been the relative effectiveness of India's national defence, but also its performance in the great power competition with China. In terms of air power, India has been accumulating a spectacular disadvantage against China since the beginning of the 2010s.

Figure 4. Number and capabilities of Indian fighter aircraft in 2014, 2019, 2024



Source: *Military Balance+*.

The development of the Indian Air Force essentially has two important characteristics. On the one hand, the process of modernising the service branch, which was once predominantly equipped with Soviet equipment, continues to rely significantly on Russian-origin technology. And on the other hand, the need for diversification is clearly evident, which simultaneously encourages the development of domestic industrial capabilities and the adaptation of non-Russian technology. The leaders of the Indian Air Force are seriously counting on expanding domestic production and development of the

Su-30, which they believe will provide them with access to cutting-edge technology that could play a crucial role in meeting the modernisation needs of the service branch. In this spirit, negotiations were held with the Russian side in 2024 regarding the possibility of further Indian production and export of this aircraft (Mishra, 2024). Consequently, it is not expected that India will give up its military-technical cooperation with the Russian Federation in the foreseeable future, but it is open to similar cooperation with Western powers, and if necessary, it may even make its partners compete against one another in this field. In meeting the needs of the Air Force – similarly to certain equipment systems of the ground forces – only a gradual shift in balance in favour of non-Russian factors is expected, which is accompanied by an increasing share of domestically developed/produced equipment, in line with the long-mentioned objective of Indian defence-industrial self-reliance. However, Western companies can also play a role in developing the necessary technological background. One related example of this is the agreement on the joint production of GE F414 jet engines between the US and India, which came into effect in 2024 (Indian Express, 2024). India has not been able to produce similar jet engines on a domestic industrial base, so it is hoped that the American cooperation and the accompanying 80% technology transfer will give new impetus to domestic fighter aircraft development programmes, enabling a qualitative leap towards the design and construction of higher-performance types (Khare, 2023).

2.3.2. Rotary-wing attack aircraft

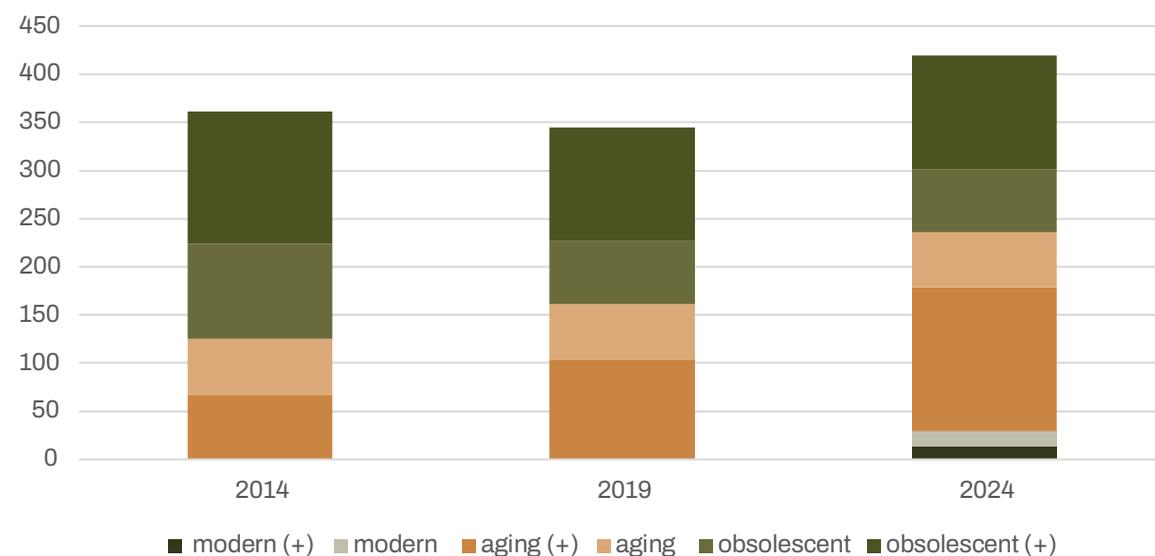
Regarding the rotary-wing aviation fleet, we can see similar processes as in the case of fighter aircraft. The attack helicopter fleet of the Indian Air Force had Soviet technology at the beginning of the period under examination, which meant 20 Mi-24 D/E helicopter gunships. In addition, AH-64E Apache Guardian helicopters ordered from the United States arrived in 2019, and the following year the fleet of 22 aircraft was completed. In 2024, India had 39 attack helicopters in service, more than 56% of which could be considered modern (*Military Balance+*). However, it is important to add that the Indian ground forces also have a rotary-wing fleet, which consists of multi-role helicopters. Among them, the HAL Rudra, the armed version of the domestically produced HAL Dhruv helicopters, also deserves attention. In 2014, only a few of these were in service, but by 2024 there were already 74, which resulted in the rapid expansion of the air support/anti-tank capabilities of the ground forces (*Military Balance+*). Further progress in the development of rotary-wing forces is the announcement by India's Ministry of Defence in November 2023 on the procurement of 156 indigenously produced Prachand light attack helicopters (Sagar, 2024), which was a reaction to the acquisition of Pakistan's new attack helicopters. The development of the Indian attack helicopter fleet was therefore an accelerating and significant process between 2014 and 2024, which is expected to define the period ahead. In terms of technical quality, the dominance of Russian technology has ended, and American and domestically produced types have become decisive in the category of attack helicopters over the past decade. It is important to add that "domestic manufacturing" mostly means domestic assembly and increasingly domestic design in India. However, a significant portion of the components and equipment installed are imported from abroad, and this may also be the case for new helicopters.

2.4. Pakistan Air Force

2.4.1. Fighters

The fixed-wing fleet of the Pakistan Air Force counted 401 fighters in 2014, which was increased to 444 by 2024. In parallel, modernisation was continuous. The proportion of obsolescent aircraft, which accounted for 69% of the equipment category in 2014, has decreased to 47%. From 2022, Pakistan also began to acquire particularly modern aircraft (see Figure 5). These include the Chinese-made Chengdu J-10 fighter jets, of which Pakistan ordered 36 and had 14 in service by 2024, and 15 JF-17 Thunder III fighters, which were jointly developed by China and Pakistan. The JF-17 is being considered by the Pakistan Air Force as a potential alternative to the F-16 Fighting Falcon, offering a much cheaper and domestically produced type providing an approximately identical capability package. However, its deployment is currently not primarily motivated by the need to replace Pakistan's F-16s, but rather the F-7 and Mirage 5 aircraft. There is no doubt that JF-17 is significantly more modern than these, regardless of how we judge its comparison with the F-16. In parallel, the highly obsolescent Dassault Mirage III fighters and Mirage 5 fighter-bombers are gradually being decommissioned. The significance of these aircraft – and their long service life – was supported by the fact that their modified versions were capable of carrying Pakistan's nuclear weapons, thereby playing a role in maintaining the country's strategic deterrence. Their role was probably taken over by the JF-17s, which are also capable of using nuclear-tipped Ra'ad cruise missiles. In addition to the Mirages, some of the, also very outdated, Chinese-made F-7 (Chengdu J-7) fighter jets were decommissioned as well. However, a total of 132 of its various variants were still in service in 2024 (Military Balance+).

Figure 5. Number and capabilities of Pakistani fighter aircraft in 2014, 2019, 2024



Source: Military Balance+.

2.4.2. Rotary-wing attack aircraft

In Pakistan, the three service branches of the armed forces have their own rotary-wing fleets. Of these, the Army operates the conventional attack helicopters. During the period under review, this mostly included Russian and American types. The Russian part of the fleet is represented by 4 Mi-35Ms, which arrived in Pakistan under a contract concluded in 2015 and have been in service since 2017 (Airforce Technology). The backbone of the fighting arm was the American Bell AH-1F Cobra helicopters left over from the Cold War. Approximately 38 of them were still in service in 2024 (The Military Balance 2025). However, from 2022, the Pakistan Army began receiving Chinese Changhe Z-10 attack helicopters. These are intended as the Chinese equivalent of the AH-64 Apache, and Pakistan was the first confirmed foreign customer of its export variant (Defence Security Asia, 2024). Originally, Islamabad intended to buy 20 Turkish AgustaWestland T129 ATAK attack helicopters under a 2018 agreement, but the acquisition fell through due to the US's denial of export permits.

The development trends of the Pakistan Air Force suggest that although the country intends to retain its F-16 aircraft, and has not given up on military cooperation with the US, its procurement decisions in the forthcoming period will prioritise its own defence industrial products and Chinese import sources. This may also be true for attack helicopters, where American-origin equipment will remain for the time being, but operated in parallel with Chinese ones. Although it is also important for Pakistan to diversify its sources of procurement of defence technologies and rely on its own self-sufficiency to the greatest possible extent, it has much narrower room for manoeuvre than India to achieve this. Relations with China are expected to become increasingly decisive in the field of military-industrial cooperation and the provision of equipment to the Pakistan Armed Forces.

2.5. Indian Navy

The development of India's naval forces has become a strategic issue over the past two decades, both in protecting national territory and economic interests against the growing presence of foreign powers in the Indian Ocean and in building the great power image of the South Asian giant. Nowadays, India clearly identifies itself as a maritime power, aiming to play the role of the dominant power in the Indian Ocean, while also acting as a net security provider for the smaller states in the region that have a strong interest in maritime traffic (Indian Navy, 2015). However, similar to the Air Force, the development of the Indian Navy has also exhibited imbalances over the past decade. The main weakness of New Delhi's naval force has long been the lack of a sufficient number of submarines and their increasingly obvious obsolescence.

2.5.1. Submarines

Although the country has a submarine development and procurement plan until 2030 (Bana, 2019), its implementation is weak. The number of vessels in service (not including ballistic missile submarines) increased from 14 in 2014 to 16 in 2024, but this was not accompanied by the significant modernisation of the technical solutions used, only the combat readiness of the units improved. It is instructive that the share of Indian submarines classified as obsolescent decreased from 30% in

2014 (not counting the Russian Akula-class submarine, which was in Indian use as a leased asset at the time) to only 25% in 2024. However, in the background, on the one hand, the mid-life refit/life extension of the Shishumar and Sindhughosh classes of submarines was taking place, and on the other hand, the commissioning of the French-designed but Indian-built Scorpène (Kalvari)-class of submarines was underway. The first of the Kalvaris entered into service in 2017, and in 2024, 5 out of the originally 6 subs in the fleet were already in service. The slowdown in procurement programmes due to professional and financial disputes has made the continuous renewal of the equipment essential for the Indian submarine forces. Several older subs from the Shishumar and Sindhughosh (Soviet Kilo) classes have been out of service in recent years for this reason. The upgrades include an operational lifespan extension (by 10-15 years) and, in the case of the Sindhughosh-class submarines, capability enhancement as well. The problem is that this does not increase the overall tactical and technical level of the subs to an extent that would make them competitive with the submarine forces of leading maritime powers, especially with the People's Republic of China's, which is relevant to the development of the Indian fleet. The Indian government is aware of the problem, which is why it recently began negotiations to acquire 3 more Kalvari-class submarines, which would be more advanced versions of the previous ones (Kumar, 2024). If an agreement is reached, the new subs could be delivered within about six years.

Further development expected in the near future is that of India leasing an Akula-class submarine for another 10 years from 2025, in accordance with its 2019 agreement with the Russian side. This could be a very important source of experience in the operation of nuclear-powered attack submarines for India, as its navy does not yet have such assets. However, the possibility has arisen that this could change in the relatively near future. Plans for the further development of the submarine fleet were announced in October 2024, according to which 6 nuclear-powered attack submarines would be built in India. A decision was made to begin construction of 2 of them (Honrada, 2024). On the one hand, these assets are really needed if New Delhi wants to compete with Beijing in naval capabilities. On the other hand, it is not yet possible to estimate when the new submarines could be put into service. It is certain that they will not be able to influence the military balance of power in Asian waters in the foreseeable future.

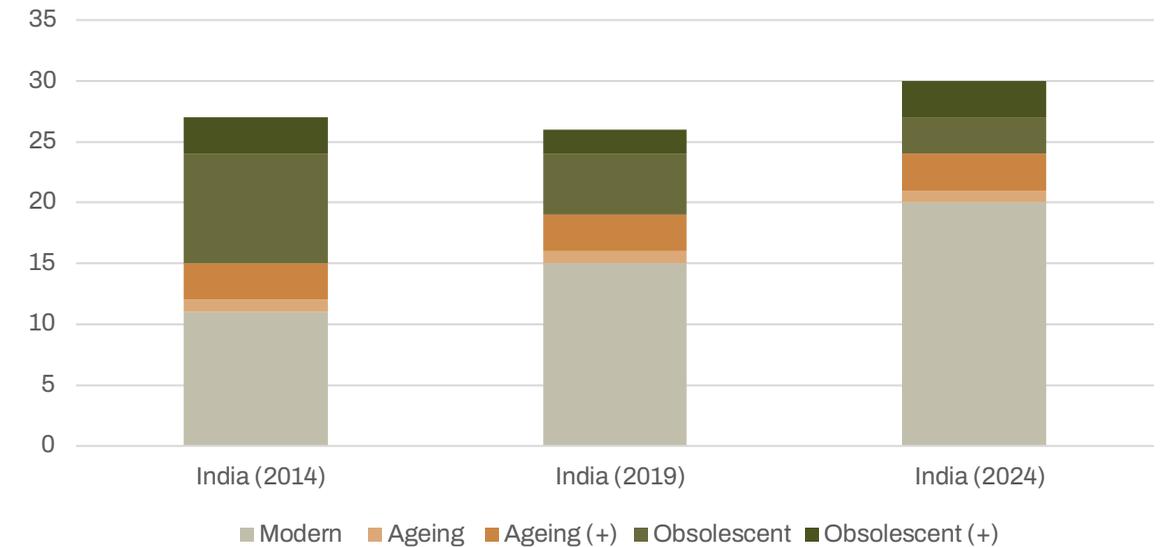
Much more efficient progress can be seen in the modernisation of the Indian surface fleet.

2.5.2. Principal surface combatants

In 2014, there were 27 principal surface combatants⁴ in the Navy, which increased to 30 in 2024. More importantly, however, the proportion of its ships that could be classified as modern increased from 41% in 2014 to 67% in 2024. In parallel, the proportion of obsolescent warships decreased from 45% to 20% (see Figure 6).

⁴ The category of principal surface combatants includes aircraft carriers, destroyers and frigates.

Figure 6. Number and capabilities of Indian Navy principal surface combatants in 2014, 2019, 2024



Source: *Military Balance+*.

Besides, India can demonstrate significant achievements in the domestic design and construction of various types of warships. Although it initially relied on significant Russian technological support in this field and there are still joint development programmes (e.g. the joint construction of the Talwar-class frigates), the South Asian power is expected to become increasingly self-sufficient in terms of surface combatants in the period ahead. This process is being slowed down predominantly by the import of onboard electronics and some of the armaments, as Indian industry is apparently not yet able to provide these in sufficient quality (Directorate of Indigenisation).

Since 2014, the operational capabilities of the surface fleet have been significantly improved with the entry into service of 3 Visakhapatnam-class and 2 Kolkata-class, domestically built, stealth guided-missile destroyers, while the strike capacity of carrier battle groups has also been expanded (Bahtic, 2021). Certainly the most spectacular undertaking by the Indian Navy during the period under review was the commissioning of the first indigenous-built Vikrant-class aircraft carrier in 2022. With this, the South Asian power has two aircraft carriers, a unique capability among countries in the region. At the same time, the future of the long-stalled aircraft carrier programme will be a major issue in the years ahead. After intense debates over the technical parameters and feasibility of India's next aircraft carriers, it is certain that no other similar Indian ship will enter into service in the forthcoming decade. In the meantime, cooperation between friendly navies will play a significant role in safeguarding India's maritime interests, highlighting the importance of the United States in New Delhi's relations.

2.6. Pakistan Navy

2.6.1. Submarines

Throughout the period under examination, the Pakistan Navy maintained 8 submarines in its service, which gave the impression of a distinctly outdated fighting arm. The composition of the fleet did not change between 2014 and 2024. Two French-made Agosta-70 diesel-electric attack submarines belonged to the fleet. They represented the technology of the 1970s and were considered obsolescent by 2024. The Agosta-B90 submarines are the improved versions of them, equipped with an air-independent propulsion system. The Navy operated three of these, two of which have already been built in Pakistan. These are currently the most advanced subs of the fighting arm, which greatly increased the operational efficiency of the Pakistani submarine forces when they were acquired, although they are now considered ageing assets in a global comparison. Pakistan plans to keep them in service for the long term, and their mid-life refit is being carried out by Turkish STM under a 2016 agreement (Gady, 2016). In addition, the fleet has three Italian-designed, Pakistani-assembled Cosmos-class midget submarines, which, although built in the 1990s, are severely obsolete. They do not deserve further attention from us.

However, the Islamic Republic has serious plans to modernise its submarine forces, driven by the need for maritime defence against the growing Indian Navy. In July 2015, Islamabad ordered 8 Hangor-class (Type 039B) attack submarines from the People's Republic of China, four of which would also be built in Pakistan (Asian Military Review, 2018). These submarines have the previously mentioned air-independent propulsion system. This is worth emphasising because this capability is not a given for Indian subs. In the case of the Kalvari-class, it would be installed as a subsequent development. The Hangor-class is generally considered to be modern, but it is highly uncertain how much the Chinese side will “dumb down” the versions intended for export to Pakistan. However, it is unlikely that the new subs will not represent a significant increase in capabilities for the Pakistan Navy. The first Hangor was launched in April 2024. If the fleet will complete, the capabilities of Pakistan's attack submarine forces will have a good chance of competing with their Indian adversaries for a while, who have fallen behind in terms of development.

2.6.2. Principal surface combatants

In parallel, there has been significant development in large surface warships in Pakistan in recent years, the first results of which appeared in 2021 with the commissioning of the first Tughril-class guided-missile frigate. These ships are modified versions of the Chinese Type 054A frigates according to Pakistani requirements. However, the modernisation did not involve an increase in the number of ships until 2024, only the replacement of obsolescent watercraft. By 2024, 50% of the main surface combatants of the Navy was considered modern, although in practice this meant 4 Tughril-class and 1 Babur-class frigates. In addition, 4 ageing Zulfikar-class guided-missile frigates (also of Chinese design) and 1 obsolescent, American-built Oliver Hazard Perry-class missile frigate formed this equipment category (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Number and capabilities of Pakistan Navy principal surface combatants in 2014, 2019, 2024



Source: *Military Balance+*.

When assessing Pakistan's naval developments, however, it must be taken into account that its objective is not to fulfil the role of a maritime power, but to prevent the Indian Navy from blockading Pakistani seaports in the event of a conflict, thus ensuring the possibility of maritime contact with the outside world. This represents a significantly different level of ambition from India, which – especially when combined with the development of the air force – can be achieved with a much smaller navy. The development of Pakistan's navy in the coming years will therefore be largely determined by the import of Chinese (and to a lesser extent Turkish) technology and cooperation with Beijing, in line with the country's long-term vision for defence cooperation.

3. Conclusions

Summarising the armament trends of India and Pakistan, the first thing we must note is that they have committed to significant military development, but this has affected the three service branches of the armed forces to a varying extent in both countries. Despite Pakistan still having a huge number of obsolescent battle tanks in service, the technical image of the fighting arm began to undergo marked improvement in 2017. India is somewhat ahead in this process, although its MBT fleet is significantly bigger than Pakistan's. The situation is similar in the case of fixed-wing attack aircraft, with the difference that, unlike India, Pakistan already has a particularly advanced type in its fleet. It is worth noting that the Pakistani J-10 fighters (and their PL-15 radar-guided missiles)

performed surprisingly well during the 2025 spring India-Pakistan clashes. Although this reportedly required Chinese real-time battlefield surveillance support (Pradhan, 2025), practical experience with the various aircraft will definitely influence the development trends of the air forces.

At the same time, India has reduced the numbers of ageing equipment since 2014 and decommissioned obsolescent fixed-wing aircraft, improving the average technical level of the fighters of its air force. In terms of rotary-wing aircraft, both countries decided on significant developments during the period under review. In this field, thanks to its Apache helicopters, India still has an advantage over Pakistan. However, this is not expected to last long if Islamabad's new Chinese-made attack helicopters live up to expectations. The latter cannot be taken for granted at all, because in recent years, purchasing states have repeatedly raised concerns over the quality of Chinese-made military hardware. The navies' development efforts have also yielded mixed results. In the case of main surface combatants, India has clear quantitative and qualitative superiority. The technical parameters of its fleet have also improved significantly since 2014. However, the Indian Navy has some shortcomings in the field of submarines. It needs serious improvement in terms of both the number of subs and their operational efficiency. At the same time, Pakistan is increasing the capabilities of its submarine forces to a new level by purchasing Chinese assets. The greatest risk facing Islamabad's military development process is its increased dependence on Chinese technology. This is true, despite the fact that Pakistan also wants to develop its own military industry by domestically assembling Chinese-origin military hardware.

As expected, when comparing the development achievements of Pakistan and India in the equipment categories examined, India's superiority is evident in many respects. But in some cases this superiority is not as great as it would be due to the difference in the economic potential of the two countries. It is also worth pointing out that India, at its current pace of armament, cannot compete with its primary rival, the People's Republic of China. The reason for this is not only the amount of equipment, but also in the known technical parameters of each type of vehicle. Over the last decade and a half, China has developed more advanced military hardware than India, and is willing to export some of this to Pakistan. Therefore, it is definitely recommended for New Delhi to accelerate the process of acquiring and commissioning new military equipment in the forthcoming decade.

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RAMACHANDRAN

Reimagining Afghanistan:
China's Path to Stability Through
a Regime-resistant Strategy

REIMAGINING AFGHANISTAN: CHINA'S PATH TO STABILITY THROUGH A REGIME- RESISTANT STRATEGY

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Abstract

While global narratives around Afghanistan have predominantly focused on security, China's evolving engagement under the Global Development Initiative (GDI) emphasises a development-driven approach. This paper investigates how China's strategic calculus in Taliban-led Afghanistan aligns with the GDI's goals of infrastructure investment, connectivity, and regional integration. It asks: How does Afghanistan fit into China's vision of pragmatic development diplomacy through the GDI, and what are the implications for regional geopolitics and China's global strategy? Based on qualitative research, including semi-structured interviews and analysis of primary and secondary documents, the study argues that Afghanistan represents a critical yet understudied node in China's development architecture. China's investments under the GDI are framed to be regime-change resistant, economically strategic, and diplomatically flexible. The findings show that China's approach to Afghanistan is less about ideological alignment and more about long-term access to mineral resources, trade routes, and regional stability. This paper contributes to the literature by extending current analyses of the GDI beyond traditional BRI geographies, highlighting how Afghanistan's inclusion redefines China's development-security nexus in post-conflict contexts.

Keywords: post-conflict development, strategic infrastructure, regime-change-proof investment, development diplomacy, China-Afghanistan relationship

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1. Introduction

The Taliban's return to power in Kabul has dramatically altered Afghanistan's political landscape, and its interim government continues to face significant challenges to legitimacy. Following the US withdrawal in 2021, China has emerged as a key diplomatic player, engaging with the Taliban to advance its strategic interests in the region (Wani, 2024). This shift occurred after the US signed the 2020 Doha agreement, which contained undisclosed annexures outlining its relationship with the Taliban (Sanger et al., 2020). China's approach to the Taliban has been both cautious and pragmatic, driven by the security vacuum in Afghanistan and the Taliban's importance to China's domestic and regional priorities (Wani, 2024). Since assuming control in August 2021, the Taliban has largely consolidated power across Afghanistan, facing limited resistance, especially in the northern regions (Wheeldon, 2022). This changing geopolitical situation gives China the opportunity to shape the Taliban's foreign policy, aligning it with its own interests without significant external interference. As relations between China and the Taliban strengthen, the latter has shown interest in joining China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has become a central component of the broader Global Development Initiative (GDI) launched by President Xi Jinping in 2021 (Haenle & Sher, 2023). The GDI, which promotes economic cooperation, infrastructure development and sustainable growth in developing countries, complements the BRI's focus on large-scale infrastructure projects (Haenle & Sher, 2023). Afghanistan's potential inclusion in these initiatives could provide substantial economic benefits, solidifying Taliban control, but it also raises security concerns, particularly regarding Xinjiang, as well as ongoing human rights issues (Pantucci, 2023; Varghese et al., 2024; Vejdani & Kumar, 2023).

The literature on China's GDI centres on its ambition to reshape global development frameworks and enhance international cooperation, especially with developing countries (MoFA_PRC, 2024). Building on the earlier BRI, the GDI aims to address pressing global challenges with a focus on sustainable development (ibid.). It promotes collaboration with a wide array of nations, including Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa, aiming to foster mutual benefits and shared interests (Kewalramani, 2024). A key aspect of the GDI is its alignment with the United Nations' Agenda 2030, which underscores the importance of sustainable development, particularly through infrastructure projects and climate cooperation (ibid.). Infrastructure investment is one of the primary pillars of the GDI, closely mirroring the BRI's focus on bridging infrastructure gaps in developing regions (MoFA_PRC, 2024). Nations across Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, Europe and ASEAN have benefited from substantial Chinese investments in sectors such as transportation, energy and telecommunications (Luzyanin & Alekseeva, 2024; Zhang, 2024; Vadell & Caria, 2025). These investments have enhanced connectivity and stimulated economic growth, particularly in countries like Kenya, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Brazil (ibid.). The GDI also marks a significant shift in China's foreign policy, extending beyond mere infrastructure to embrace a comprehensive development agenda (MoFA_PRC, 2021). Despite the promising prospects of international collaboration, the GDI faces significant challenges. Concerns about procurement corruption, environmental sustainability and the social impacts of infrastructure projects persist, echoing issues seen during the BRI (Komakech & Ombati, 2023). Additionally, some critics argue

that the GDI could lead to greater dependency among developing nations, posing risks to their sovereignty and long-term economic viability (ibid.). These concerns highlight the need to critically assess the long-term implications of China's development strategies, particularly regarding global power dynamics and the sustainability of the initiative.

An often overlooked aspect in the literature is the importance of Afghanistan within the framework of the GDI. Afghanistan, a country that has faced political instability and economic challenges, presents a unique case for both China and Afghanistan. For China, Afghanistan represents a strategic partner in expanding its influence in the Middle East and Central Asia, a region that is crucial for securing energy supplies, trade routes and geopolitical stability (Rahman et al., 2023). Through the GDI, China could help Afghanistan develop its infrastructure, enhance connectivity and create new economic opportunities while also fostering regional security. For Afghanistan, participating in the GDI could offer the possibility of economic recovery and regional integration, providing vital support for reconstruction efforts and poverty alleviation. This mutually beneficial relationship could also help Afghanistan improve its standing within the international community, further stabilising the region. Understanding Afghanistan's role in the GDI is essential for both China's long-term goals in the Middle East and Central Asia and Afghanistan's aspirations for sustainable development and regional cooperation. However, the focus of this paper is Afghanistan.

This study adopts a qualitative methodology, combining a semi-structured interview with documentary analysis. The interview participant was selected through purposive sampling and is based in Afghanistan, offering grounded insights into China's post-2021 engagement and development activities under the Global Development Initiative (GDI). The interview was conducted virtually and in person. In addition, the study analyses a range of Chinese policy documents, investment announcements, academic literature and regional media sources. Thematic content analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns related to strategic infrastructure, diplomatic pragmatism and regime-proof investments.³ Limitations include the evolving political landscape in Afghanistan and restricted access to Chinese-language primary materials. This paper makes three core contributions to the literature. First, it extends the existing knowledge of China's development diplomacy by framing Afghanistan as a central rather than peripheral actor within the GDI, challenging the Belt and Road Initiative-centred focus of much current research. Second, it conceptualises the China-Afghanistan Economic Corridor (CAEC) as a strategic and infrastructural missing link in China's broader regional integration architecture. Third, it theorises a model of pragmatic development diplomacy, illustrating how China engages conflict-affected states through politically adaptive, infrastructure-

³ Regime-proof investments, also termed regime-resistant strategies, refer to a model of foreign engagement in which a state deliberately structures its investments, infrastructure projects and diplomatic relationships to remain insulated from the nature or stability of the host country's ruling regime. In the case of China's engagement with Taliban-led Afghanistan, this approach marks a departure from regime-centric conditionality and reflects a shift towards pragmatic, continuity-focused development diplomacy. Rather than relying on regime legitimacy, democratic norms or ideological alignment, regime-resistant strategies emphasise functional infrastructure, resource access and logistical integration, enabling investments to persist regardless of political transitions. This model allows the investor state to pursue long-term strategic objectives in fragile or post-conflict environments while minimising exposure to political volatility and normative entanglements.

led investment strategies that prioritise stability over ideology. Collectively, these contributions advance our understanding of China's evolving approach to development in post-conflict regions.

In this regard, this paper examines Afghanistan's stability, security and prosperity as key factors in China's strategic engagement with the country. It argues that their relationship is mutually beneficial, with both nations relying on each other for economic growth and political stability, though this partnership demands careful navigation. The study situates Afghanistan within China's GDI, highlighting the initiative's core objectives, sustainable development, inclusive growth and regional integration, and Afghanistan's pivotal role in advancing these goals. Given its strategic location and rich resources, Afghanistan aligns with China's broader vision of global connectivity. The paper also analyses China's investments in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan under the GDI framework, particularly through the BRI. These investments are structured to be regime-proof, ensuring continuity despite political shifts. By prioritising long-term rewards with minimal risk, China seeks to solidify its economic and strategic foothold in Afghanistan while fostering sustainable development.

2. A two-way street – The reciprocal strategic significance of Afghanistan and China

First, economic stimulus and revitalisation: fuelling China's growth through Afghanistan's development. China's economic slowdown, caused by an ageing population, rising debt and trade tensions, has underscored the need for new growth opportunities (Kwong, 2023; Li, 2023). Afghanistan offers China a promising avenue for investment and industrial expansion. Strategically located at the intersection of Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East, Afghanistan serves as a vital transit hub for Chinese goods en route to Europe, Africa and the Middle East. A stable Afghanistan would increase demand for Chinese construction materials, machinery and technology, revitalising its manufacturing sector. Moreover, Afghanistan's vast mineral reserves, including copper, lithium and rare earth metals, provide China with a means to reduce reliance on external suppliers amid trade disputes. Infrastructure projects such as roads, railways and pipelines would enhance China's access to energy-rich regions, aligning with the BRI. Additionally, Afghanistan's reconstruction could expand China's consumer market, facilitating growth in electronics and automobiles. By ensuring Afghanistan's stability, China strengthens its economic foothold and geopolitical influence (Kwong, 2023; Li, 2023).

Second, Afghanistan as the missing link in global supply chains: Afghanistan, often overlooked due to its history of instability, holds significant potential as a key logistics hub. Strategically located at the intersection of Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East, it serves as a vital bridge for regional trade. For China, Afghanistan presents an opportunity to enhance supply chain connectivity. Currently, logistical operations face inefficiencies due to insecure routes, particularly in western China. The country's instability has hindered the potential of this strategic position. If Afghanistan stabilises, particularly with the Taliban ensuring security, it could open alternative

trade routes, reducing China's dependence on congested maritime routes like the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea. Additionally, developing transport infrastructure, including railways and pipelines, would integrate Xinjiang into global trade networks. This would strengthen China's economic influence, improve trade efficiency and expand access to new markets.

Third, Afghanistan's stability is crucial for China, particularly regarding Xinjiang, its most vulnerable western region (Qu & Peng, 2024). Home to the Uyghur ethnic minority, Xinjiang has long struggled with separatist movements and religious extremism (Greitens et al., 2020). Over the past decade, radicalised Uyghurs and separatist factions have carried out violent uprisings, which China attributes to militant groups like the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) operating from Afghanistan (Kumar & Ramachandran, 2024a). Afghanistan's instability has allowed such groups to flourish, finding refuge in its rugged terrain (Sun, 2022). A stable Afghanistan would help China curb cross-border terrorism and prevent the spread of extremist ideologies threatening Xinjiang (MoFA_PRC, 2022; Kumar & Ramachandran, 2024a). Additionally, stability would support China's regional economic initiatives, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), ensuring that broader geopolitical and economic goals remain secure (Siddiqui, 2024).

3. Conceptualising the Global Development Initiative

In his address to the 76th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on 21 September 2021, in a virtual format, China's President Xi Jinping introduced the GDI as a global public good (MoFA_PRC, 2021). The GDI aims to redefine China's approach to international cooperation by offering a blueprint for fostering economic growth, infrastructure development and poverty alleviation across the globe (ibid.). Building on China's previous successes, particularly through initiatives like the BRI, the GDI seeks to promote sustainable and inclusive development, particularly in developing countries (ibid.). With a focus on global partnerships, infrastructure connectivity and economic integration, the GDI aligns with China's overarching foreign policy objectives of expanding its global influence while securing long-term growth (Kewalramani, 2024). A key area where the GDI holds immense potential is Afghanistan, a country that, despite its strategic location and resource wealth, has faced long-standing instability. Through the GDI, China aims to help unlock Afghanistan's potential, creating benefits for both countries and the broader region.

The GDI is designed to address the development challenges of low-income and emerging countries, emphasising the promotion of growth through enhanced infrastructure, sustainable development, and increased trade connectivity (MoFA_PRC, 2021). The initiative is built around four core principles:

first, people-centred development prioritises human welfare, ensuring equitable access to education, healthcare and job opportunities to improve living standards (MoFA_PRC, 2021; Lei, 2022). Second, green development promotes sustainable growth by encouraging countries to adopt renewable energy, green technologies and eco-friendly infrastructure to minimise environmental

impact (ibid.). Third, innovation and connectivity drive economic progress through technological advancements and infrastructure development. The GDI supports the building of roads, railways and digital networks, particularly in Asia, the Middle East and Africa, to enhance global trade integration (ibid.). Fourth, partnership and shared benefits emphasise cooperation over competition, fostering mutually beneficial relationships where both China and its partners share in development gains, reinforcing economic ties and stability (ibid.). These principles form the foundation of the GDI, establishing it as a framework for addressing global development challenges (ibid.).

China's GDI presents an opportunity to stabilise Afghanistan while unlocking its economic potential. Through this framework, China can offer financial support, technical expertise and infrastructure investment to improve Afghanistan's transportation, energy and digital connectivity. If internal security, particularly under Taliban rule, is maintained, Afghanistan could become a key regional hub, strengthening China's access to West, Central and South Asia (Rahman et al., 2023). Integrating Afghanistan into key economic corridors via roads, railways and pipelines would enhance trade security and economic growth for both nations (Yang & Guo, 2022). Afghanistan's vast mineral reserves, including copper, lithium and rare earth elements, provide China with a critical supply chain advantage for its technology and manufacturing industries (Manish & Kaushik, 2023). Investing in Afghanistan's infrastructure would reduce China's reliance on external suppliers while fostering regional economic integration. Additionally, the GDI allows China to play a key role in stabilising Afghanistan and mitigating regional security threats. Ensuring Afghanistan's stability is essential for securing China's Xinjiang region, which has faced separatist and extremist threats (Greitens et al., 2020; Sun, 2022). A stable Afghanistan could serve as a model for broader regional cooperation, aligning with China's long-term strategic and economic goals. Examining China's post-Taliban investments, especially in infrastructure and regional connectivity, provides insights into how the GDI could be implemented to shape Afghanistan's future within the evolving political landscape.

4. China's investments in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (2021-)

In the wake of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, China has adopted a strategic approach to its economic engagement, which mirrors the principles of the GDI⁴. Through a combination of development-focused investments and national security considerations, China is attempting to foster long-term peace, stability and growth in Afghanistan, with the ultimate aim of securing regional connectivity and bolstering its own economic interests. This approach also aligns with China's broader foreign policy goals, including its BRI, emphasising the integration of Afghanistan into critical trade networks (Acxir & RahmanZai, 2024). At the core of China's strategy

⁴ As of 30 March 2025, there is no public information indicating that the Taliban has signed an agreement with China to join the GDI. However, many of China's ongoing investments in Afghanistan align with the GDI's objectives. The projects, particularly in infrastructure, energy and resource extraction, reflect China's broader development goals under initiatives like the BRI, which overlaps with the GDI's ambitions for sustainable and inclusive development (Acxir & RahmanZai, 2024).

is the belief that economic progress and security go hand in hand and that stability is necessary for the successful implementation of development projects, a principle China has successfully employed in its own Xinjiang region.⁵

Since the Taliban's ascension to power, China has engaged with Afghanistan through a cautious but progressively expanding investment strategy. The GDI emphasises sustainable development, infrastructure growth and regional integration, and China's investments in Afghanistan directly align with these pillars. The GDI also stresses the importance of fostering local ownership and ensuring that development benefits reach local populations (Lei, 2022). This is evident in China's approach to Afghanistan, where investments have already started to transform the country's agricultural and industrial sectors, creating jobs, reducing poverty and integrating Afghanistan into global supply chains (Xinhua, 2023; Khan & Sayed, 2025).

4.1. Strategic interests and economic investments

China's economic engagement with Afghanistan is driven by strategic goals that align with the GDI's vision for regional prosperity and sustainable development. Afghanistan offers China a wealth of natural resources, including critical minerals like lithium, copper and rare earth elements, which are essential to China's growing technological and manufacturing sectors. China's investments in these sectors, such as the long-stalled copper mining project, have resumed with new Chinese funding, marking a significant step towards unlocking Afghanistan's mineral wealth (Karam, 2024; Kumar & Ramachandran, 2024b; Interview, 2025).

In addition, China has supported the development of Afghanistan's energy sector, with the first phase of oil extraction in the Amu Darya basin now complete (*ibid.*). These initiatives are part of China's broader strategy to secure access to energy resources, which are vital to its economic growth and industrial needs. The expansion of Chinese involvement in these sectors not only boosts Afghanistan's economic prospects but also strengthens China's foothold in the region, contributing to its geopolitical strategy. This dual focus on economic development and security aligns perfectly with the GDI's goal of fostering peace through prosperity (Kumar & Ramachandran, 2025b).

China's engagement in agriculture has been particularly impactful. With a focus on diversifying Afghanistan's agricultural output, China has helped shift local farmers away from the cultivation of opium and illegal crops towards cash crops like saffron, pine nuts and dried apricots, which have a growing demand in Chinese markets (Xinhua, 2023; Interview, 2025). This shift has not only helped improve local incomes but also created job opportunities, contributing to the overall stability of the region. The GDI's emphasis on people-centred development is evident in these efforts, as China's investments aim to uplift local communities, reduce poverty and improve livelihoods.

⁵ According to Einar Tangen, CGTN expert commentator on political affairs, when economic prosperity reaches the base of the pyramid the population will be lured away from extremism and terrorism. Once Afghanistan's people experience a secure, prosperous and peaceful existence with their families, they will never return to the pathways of terrorism (Al Jazeera English, 2018).

4.2. Expanding bilateral economic ties

China's commitment to Afghanistan's economic development is evident in the growing trade and investment flows between the two countries. Since 2023, China has progressively expanded its economic footprint in Afghanistan, spanning both large-scale infrastructure projects and smaller, community-driven initiatives. One notable example is the USD 200 million Chinatown Kabul project and connectivity projects, which aim to create a new metropolis capable of accommodating three million people and facilitating commercial activities (Al Jazeera English, 2022; Kumar & Ramachandran, 2025a). This ambitious project reflects the GDI's emphasis on regional connectivity and infrastructure development, with a focus on fostering sustainable growth and expanding economic opportunities.

Imran Zakeria,⁶ an Afghan-based China observer and researcher, underscores the tangible impact of these investments, stating, "Chinese promises are now taking shape. The long-stalled copper mining project has resumed operations with Chinese funding, and the first oil extraction phase in the Amu Darya basin is complete. Agriculture, which is vital for most Afghans, is picking up with increased exports of pine nuts, saffron and dried apricots. This is creating jobs and improving local incomes" (Interview, 2025). These developments highlight the broader economic transformation that China's investments are fostering in Afghanistan.

The progress of these investments has been relatively smooth, largely due to China's satisfaction with the Taliban's adherence to security and counterterrorism commitments (Karam, 2024). As the Taliban maintains stability within Afghanistan, China has grown more confident in expanding its investments. This stability has, in turn, facilitated increased trade and economic exchanges between the two nations. In line with the GDI's goals of regional integration and promoting trade, China has worked with the Taliban to eliminate tariffs on Afghan exports to China, further facilitating economic cooperation (Cash, 2024). In 2023, Afghanistan exported goods worth USD 33.93 million to China, while China exported goods worth USD 959.69 million to Afghanistan, underscoring the growing economic ties between the two nations (OEC, 2025).

Beyond infrastructure and trade, China's growing presence in Afghanistan extends to people-to-people and cultural exchanges (Zakeria, 2024; Interview, 2025). Chinese businesses are increasingly investing in small and medium-sized enterprises in Afghanistan, ranging from restaurants and factories to media ventures (*ibid.*). These grassroots investments are fostering local community development, creating jobs and contributing to a positive environment for Chinese business and cultural integration within Afghan society (*ibid.*). As a result, China is not only strengthening its economic ties with Afghanistan but also helping to lay the groundwork for long-term prosperity and stability (*ibid.*).

⁶ Imran Zakeria, a Kabul-based researcher at the Regional Studies Center, Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan, specialises in Afghanistan's role in regional politics and Afghanistan-China relations. He was personally interviewed by the first author in January 2025 (Interview, 2025).

4.3. Regime-change-proof investments

A unique aspect of China's investment strategy in Afghanistan is its regime-change-proof approach, which ensures that Chinese projects remain resilient even amidst political instability. This approach is particularly crucial in conflict or war-torn countries, where political uncertainty and regime changes are common. By adhering to the principle of engaging with “whoever rules the country”, China ensures its investments are protected regardless of political shifts or changes in leadership (Pant, 2021). One key element that strengthens China's regime-change-proof approach is its reliance on secretive meetings and covert dialogue with multiple stakeholders. By conducting discreet discussions, China builds early relationships with influential figures across both government and opposition, securing its long-term investments regardless of political shifts (Khudaykulova, 2019; Hindustan Times, 2023). However, it reacts strongly when any party exposes these confidential negotiations to the public domain (Cecco, 2022). These covert dialogues enable China to understand the political landscape more effectively and anticipate shifts in power, thus mitigating risks to its investments. Unlike more public and visible engagement, this clandestine approach allows China to operate without triggering resistance or backlash from any one political group, ensuring smoother transitions in unstable environments (ibid.).

China's strategy also defies the influence of Western powers, particularly when it comes to defining which entities are considered “terrorists” or “extremists”. China does not heed the Western definition of terrorism; instead, it conducts business with whoever aligns with its national interests and offers potential benefits for the Chinese people (Verma, 2023). This flexibility allows China to engage with both state and non-state actors, including militant groups, as long as they safeguard China's interests. This pragmatic approach has allowed China to build relationships with diverse stakeholders, including factions that may be labelled as terrorists by other countries. These secretive deals help China forge trust with multiple parties, free from undue external influence. China has also consistently refrained from criticising the Taliban for its domestic policies, particularly concerning women's rights and human rights (Leslie, 2024). Rather than focusing on Afghanistan's internal issues, China has kept its approach strictly pragmatic, engaging with the Taliban in a way that maximises its interests in the country (ibid.). This focus on economic and strategic engagement allows China to avoid getting entangled in Afghanistan's complex domestic concerns, ensuring that its investments remain secure and its strategic goals intact (ibid.).

This approach has earned China significant diplomatic credit, particularly in the Middle East (Cafiero, 2023; Altin, 2022). Notably, China facilitated the thawing of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, helping to bring both countries together for negotiations (ibid.). By remaining open to talking with both state and non-state actors, China ensures that it is not bound by the ideological or political constraints that often limit Western diplomatic engagement. This flexibility and willingness to engage with all parties has strengthened China's role as a global power, capable of navigating even the most complex and unstable geopolitical landscapes while ensuring its investments remain safe and its interests protected.

5. Weaving growth – The fabric of shared prosperity

The BRI, a global infrastructure and energy network, was introduced by Xi Jinping in 2013 during his visit to Kazakhstan as the “Silk Road Economic Belt” (MoFA, 2013). By 2017, it was integrated into the Chinese Communist Party's Constitution, symbolising China's ambition to enhance its global leadership role as its power grew (Xinhua, 2017). A key component of the BRI is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), connecting Gwadar Port in Pakistan's Balochistan to Kashgar in China's Xinjiang region (Ali, 2022). This corridor, combining sea and land routes, aims to secure China's energy imports from West Asia, avoiding potential disruptions via the Strait of Malacca and addressing national security concerns with Uyghur militants (ibid.). CPEC benefits extend to Pakistan, with millions of jobs created and significant contributions to economic growth (ibid.). By 2022, the CPEC had boosted Pakistan's exports and energy supply (Ullah et al., 2022). However, while the BRI is lauded for fostering regional connectivity, it faces criticism for potential debt traps and neo-colonialism (ibid.).

The China-Afghanistan Economic Corridor, an envisioned element of China's proposed BRI expansion into Afghanistan, aims to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). A key feature of this plan is the utilisation of existing land routes once used by NATO forces during the Global War on Terrorism (2001-2021). These routes pass through or near to Afghanistan's resource-rich regions, providing an opportunity for economic growth without the need to build new land transport infrastructure from the ground up, as depicted in Figure 1 (the land transport network outlined in Table 1). By integrating Afghanistan into the BRI, China not only stimulates the country's growth but also opens up new markets and investment prospects for itself. This collaboration aligns with the GDI, which promotes shared prosperity by fostering sustainable development, enhancing connectivity and deepening economic integration across regions. The GDI's emphasis on inclusive growth and cooperation complements the objectives of the BRI, providing a framework for revitalising both Afghanistan's economy and China's search for new avenues of growth and expansion.

Figure 1 provides a visual depiction of the data presented in Table 1. This map illustrates the proposed extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan via key national and Asian Highway routes. It highlights existing infrastructure that could form the backbone of the China-Afghanistan Economic Corridor, facilitating regional trade and transit.

Figure 1: Envisioned China-Afghanistan Economic Corridor (CAEC)



Source: Author's visualisation based on transport data from the Afghanistan Ministry of Public Works, Pakistan National Highway Authority and UNESCAP Asian Highway Network (2024) (Kumar & Ramachandran, 2025b).

Table 1 lists the national and Asian Highways that form the proposed China-Afghanistan Economic Corridor, detailing the route connections from Kashgar, China, to Chabahar Port via Afghanistan and Iran. Source: Compiled by the author using route data from the UNESCAP Asian Highway Database and national infrastructure authorities of China, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran (2024) (Kumar & Ramachandran, 2025b).

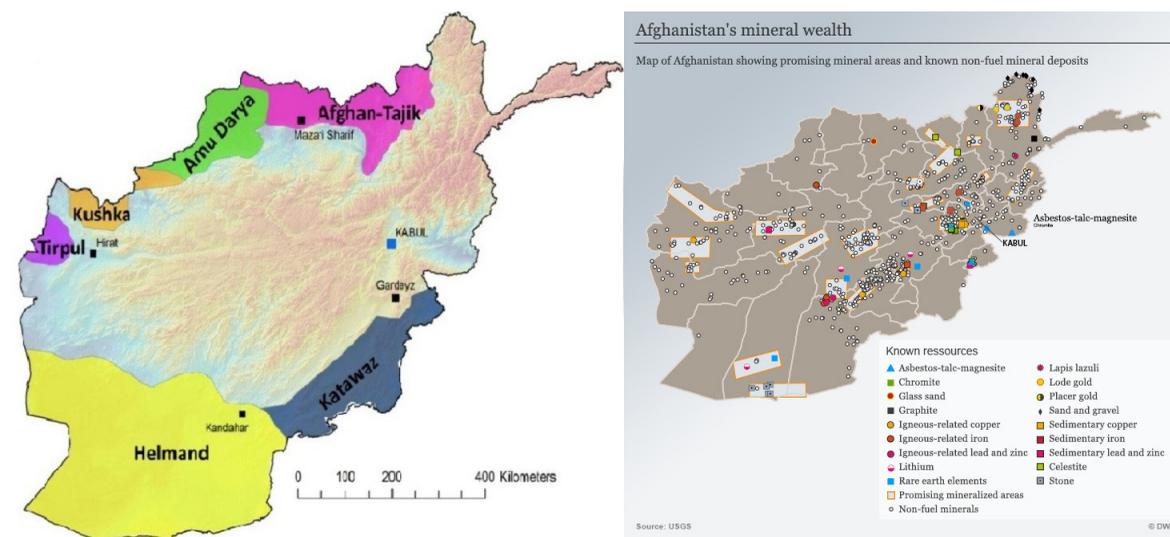
| Table 1: CAEC's national highways part of the Asian Highway Network | | | | |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| Asian Highways | National Highways | | | |
| | I. China | II. Pakistan | III. Afghanistan (CAEC) | IV. Iran |
| AH - 4 | 1. G-314: Kashgar, Xinjiang to Khunjerab Pass | 2. KKH or N-35: Khunjerab Pass to Hasan Abdal | | |
| AH - 1 | | 1. M-1: Hasan Abdal to Peshawar 2. N-5: Peshawar to Torkham | 3. NH08: Torkham to Kabul 4. NH0101: Kabul to Kandahar 5. NH0101: Kandahar to Delaram 6. NH0102: Delaram to Herat 7. NH63: Herat to Islam Qala-Taybad border | 8. Islam Qala-Taybad border to Mashhad |
| AH - 76 | | | 1. NH0103: Herat to Mazar-i-Sharif 2. NH0104: Mazar-i-Sharif to Puli Khumri | |
| AH - 77 | | | 1. NH67 and NH 06: Herat to Charikar | |
| AH - 7 | | | 1. Puli Khumri to Charikar to Kabul | |
| AH - 71 | | | 1. Route 606 or NH49: Delaram to Zaranj | 2. Zaranj to Zahedan |
| AH - 75 | | | | 1. Mashhad to Zahedan to Chabahar Port |

Source: Compiled by the author using route data from the UNESCAP Asian Highway Database and national infrastructure authorities of China, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran (2024) (Kumar & Ramachandran, 2025b).

5.1. A GDI blueprint for Afghanistan – Trade, transit and sustainable development

The strategic importance of Afghanistan in global trade and energy routes is becoming increasingly evident, particularly in the context of China's ambitious economic and geopolitical interests. Afghanistan's vast mineral wealth, strategic location and potential as a trade and energy hub make it a key partner in China's BRI. This collaboration, primarily through the creation of the China-Afghanistan Economic Corridor (CAEC), is set to reshape regional connectivity and prosperity. Beyond economic development alone, this partnership also emphasises the need for stability and security in Afghanistan, which is crucial for realising the broader benefits of the CAEC. This section explores how the CAEC can transform Afghanistan's economic landscape while aligning with China's domestic interests and the GDI, promoting inclusive growth and regional integration.

Figure 2: Mapping Afghanistan's critical minerals



Source: Adapted by the author from USGS data, Afghan Ministry of Mines and Petroleum reports and Reuters (2021).

Figure 2 maps show the geographic locations of key mineral and energy resources in Afghanistan, such as lithium, rare earth, copper and oil, overlaid with major highway infrastructure. It demonstrates the strategic value of integrating Afghanistan's resource zones into regional supply chains under the CAEC framework.

Economic potential and resource utilisation: Afghanistan's vast mineral resources are a key factor in attracting China's strategic interest. The United States Geological Survey estimates untapped minerals in Afghanistan to be worth approximately USD 1 trillion, with some reports suggesting figures as high as USD 3 trillion (Farmer, 2010). These resources include substantial reserves of iron, copper, cobalt, gold, lithium and rare earth metals, all essential to modern industry. Ghazni Province, in particular, is believed to house the world's largest lithium reserves (Simpson, 2011).

China's focus on Afghanistan's mineral sector is not solely driven by economic factors but also by the goal of reducing reliance on the United States for critical minerals, thereby securing a more resilient global supply chain for key technologies like semiconductors, chips and lithium batteries (Gulley et al., 2018). Afghanistan's lithium and rare earth metal resources are of particular importance to China (ibid.). A 2019 report by the Afghan Ministry of Mines estimates reserves of 1.4 million tonnes of rare earth minerals (Reuters, 2021). These metals are critical to consumer electronics and military technologies. Afghanistan is also rich in copper, which is vital to electrical infrastructure, with reserves valued at over USD 100 billion (ibid.). Additionally, the country holds substantial reserves of crude oil, natural gas and natural gas liquids (ibid.). Lithium and rare earth metals are primarily found in provinces like Ghazni, Uruzgan and Helmand, which are well connected by land transport networks such as NH0101. Copper deposits are located in areas served by transport routes like NH0101, NH0102 and NH0103, ensuring efficient transportation. The geographical distribution of Afghanistan's mineral and energy resources coincides with its main national highways, providing convenient access for transport. Currently, China imports lithium and copper via ocean freight from the Chile-Bolivia-Argentina region, which takes over a month (Sanchez Lopez, 2023). Afghanistan, due to its proximity and potential for favourable political negotiations, offers a more viable and cost-effective alternative, possibly providing better prices. Additionally, Afghanistan's significant Brent crude reserves further enhance its attractiveness to China, especially as the country looks to diversify its energy sources and trade routes. The concentration of oil and gas in areas such as the Afghan-Tajik region, Amu Darya basin and Herat province (Reuters, 2021), along with well-established highways like NH0103, further underscores Afghanistan's strategic value. The geological survey map (Figure 2), aligned with major national highways, facilitates the efficient transportation of Afghanistan's mineral and energy resources, making it an increasingly attractive trade partner for China.

Regional connectivity and strategic infrastructure: Afghanistan's strategic location positions it as a vital component in connecting West, Central and South Asia. The envisioned China-Afghanistan Economic Corridor (CAEC) is a crucial part of China's broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to enhance regional connectivity and create new trade corridors. Afghanistan's role as a trade and energy hub is amplified by its proximity to energy-rich countries like Iran, with which China already has strong economic ties despite ongoing sanctions. The Delaram-Zaranj highway connecting Afghanistan to Iran's Khuzestan and Boyer-Ahmad provinces is critical for facilitating China's energy imports and avoiding the congested and vulnerable Strait of Malacca. The diplomatic initiatives by China, such as facilitating détente between Iran and Saudi Arabia, align with the goals of the GDI by promoting regional cooperation and integrated energy trade. This development highlights Afghanistan's potential as a transit route that can streamline trade from countries like Iraq, Kuwait and the UAE to China. These infrastructural enhancements could provide Afghanistan with opportunities for economic integration on a regional scale, creating an interconnected economic

zone where shared prosperity becomes a tangible reality.⁷ These infrastructure projects also reflect the GDI's focus on promoting inclusive growth. The potential creation of new trade routes, energy corridors and regional partnerships offers significant economic opportunities not only for Afghanistan but also for neighbouring countries. Afghanistan's role in the CAEC will help facilitate greater trade and energy flows, thereby contributing to the region's economic growth and integration.

Socio-economic development: Afghanistan's integration into regional trade networks and the development of its vast mineral wealth could reshape its socio-economic landscape. Expanding critical infrastructure and trade corridors under initiatives such as the China-Afghanistan Economic Corridor (CAEC) will generate millions of direct and indirect jobs, steering the population away from illicit activities such as opium poppy cultivation (Al Jazeera English, 2018). Einar Tangen argues that economic prosperity reduces extremism by offering people alternative livelihoods and a more secure future (ibid.). However, achieving this transformation depends on stability and security, which remain Afghanistan's greatest challenges. While economic opportunities are abundant, they cannot be fully realised without addressing threats posed by extremism and terrorism in the Af-Pak region. The success of the CAEC and the GDI relies on comprehensive security diplomacy among regional stakeholders. The GDI's focus on inclusive growth and peacebuilding is key to ensuring development benefits reach marginalised communities affected by conflict. China's pragmatic diplomacy, which prioritises engagement over isolation, aligns with these objectives (Yousaf & Jabarkhail, 2021). By fostering cooperation with the Taliban and regional actors, China seeks to promote stability while integrating Afghanistan into regional and global markets. Through the GDI framework, Afghanistan's economic transformation could lead to broader social stability and long-term peace.

Thus, the China-Afghanistan Economic Corridor represents a pivotal opportunity for Afghanistan to unlock its economic potential while positioning itself as a central player in regional and global trade networks. By integrating Afghanistan into China's BRI and aligning with the GDI, both countries can create a framework for shared prosperity. The collaboration promises economic growth, infrastructure development and regional integration, ultimately contributing to a more connected and stable Asia. The successful synchronisation of security, economic development and inclusive growth is essential for realising the full potential of the CAEC, and the GDI offers the ideal framework to ensure that these goals are achieved sustainably and equitably.

⁷ Due to space and word limitations, this research specifically focuses on the China-Afghanistan Economic Corridor and its connection to the Middle East, excluding potential outcomes from its linkages with Central Asian nations.

6. Conclusions

Afghanistan's potential integration into China's GDI presents both significant opportunities and challenges. As a crucial missing component in China's GDI framework, Afghanistan offers solutions to Beijing's global supply chain and logistics challenges while unlocking multifaceted benefits, including energy security and access to critical minerals. Afghanistan's strategic location, rich natural resources, and potential role in the BRI are a win-win for all – Afghanistan, China and the region. China, facing its own economic challenges, views Afghanistan as a key partner for gaining access to vital resources such as lithium, copper and rare earth metals, which are essential to its technology and manufacturing sectors. Additionally, Afghanistan's position as a transit hub linking Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East positions it as a vital part of China's broader economic strategy.

Since the Taliban's takeover, China has progressively expanded its developmental investments in Afghanistan. These investments are designed to be regime-proof, ensuring they remain secure despite potential political changes. This approach reflects China's calculated engagement with conflict-prone nations like Afghanistan, anticipating long-term economic and strategic advantages for both sides. The GDI's core principles of people-centred development, green growth and international partnerships align well with China's investments in Afghanistan. Infrastructure development, including roads, railways and energy pipelines, would revitalise Afghanistan's economy, create jobs and stimulate industries, contributing to the country's long-term stability and prosperity. China's economic approach/model with Afghanistan presents a framework that addresses volatile, conflict-prone and war-torn regions, ensuring long-term economic development.

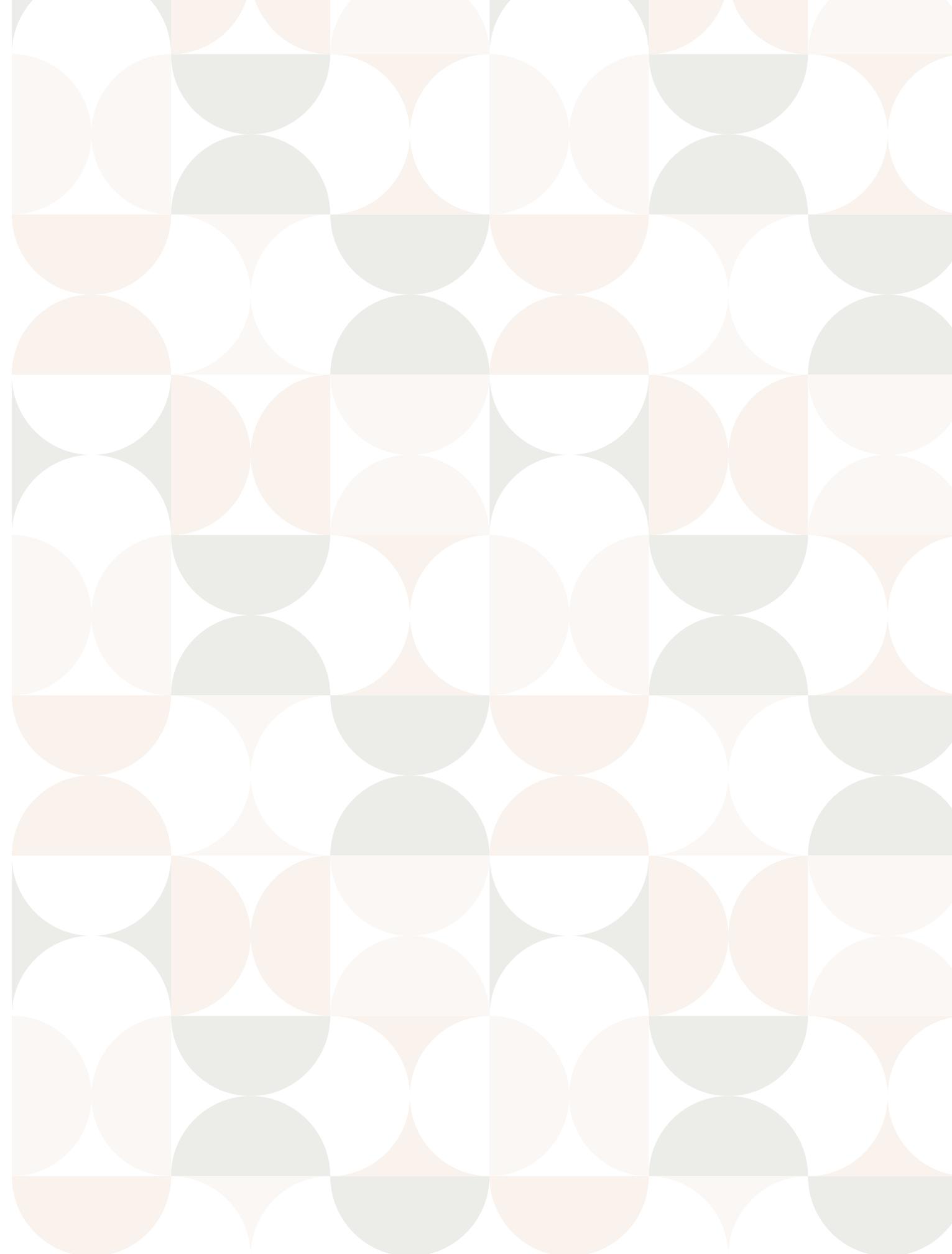
However, challenges remain. Afghanistan's security situation, marked by extremism and instability, poses risks to the success of these initiatives. While the Taliban's rule has brought relative stability, internal unrest could undermine economic growth. Moreover, concerns about debt sustainability and the environmental impact from large-scale infrastructure projects persist, alongside human rights issues under the Taliban regime. Despite these challenges, the potential benefits of Afghanistan's integration into the GDI are substantial. It would be intriguing to explore how China's new Global Security Initiative (GSI) can support and complement the GDI, creating synergies between the two frameworks to ensure Afghanistan's long-term stability and development. This intersection of GDI and GSI in Afghanistan warrants further research, as it could offer valuable insights into how these initiatives can work together to foster sustainable growth and regional cooperation.

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IMRAN KHAN

Tacit Support
or Strategic Failure?

TACIT SUPPORT OR STRATEGIC FAILURE? REVIEWING U.S. WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN AND THE CONSEQUENT REGIME CHANGE

IMRAN KHAN¹

Abstract

This research article analyses the precipitous fall of the democratically elected Afghan government and the subsequent takeover by the Afghan Taliban in August 2021. This study posits that the swift regime change in Afghanistan was not even remotely an organic process and was mainly accomplished with the tacit approval of the United States. By conducting a critical analysis of American policies, military strategies, and diplomatic communications prior to the Taliban takeover, this study examines whether the actions, diplomatic or strategic, of the United States had indirectly paved the way for the Taliban to overthrow the regime in Afghanistan. Relying on primary sources such as statements by the US government, protocols of the withdrawal and regional diplomatic moves, as well as secondary sources such as the analyses of the pundits of international relations and relevant research articles, this study explores the hypothesis that the US had vested interests

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in a chaotic and abrupt rather than a planned and controlled withdrawal from Afghanistan. This study intends to employ a qualitative exploratory research method to examine the aforementioned hypothesis. Moreover, this study will employ critical discourse analysis to examine the language used in the official statements of the United States, through which we can identify the power dynamics, implied inferences, and rationalisation of withdrawal from Afghanistan. This research will also employ process tracing to examine how certain actions of the United States led to a regime change in Afghanistan. Lastly, a limitation that the researcher may face during the process would be the unavailability of classified information from the US government.

Keywords: Afghanistan, US withdrawal, Taliban, regime change

1. Introduction

The withdrawal of the American armed forces from Afghanistan is a global matter with real-world implications for several states. This underscores the importance of unpacking American intentions behind this abrupt and poorly planned withdrawal. There are various explanations for the American withdrawal from Afghanistan. Some scholars believe that it was internal political pressure that made the withdrawal possible. Stephen Walt argues that the US wanted to revert to its limited foreign policy preferences. Conversely, Vali Nasr believes that the cost of the Afghan war was increasing, while its strategic and political importance was diminishing (Nasr, 2014). The US spent more than 40 billion dollars annually to maintain its presence in Afghanistan (Walt, 2021).

However, this research concentrates on an aspect of withdrawal that has been less explored. It is conducted as a critical reading to revisit and understand the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Although in general academic debates, this withdrawal is usually attributed to internal political pressure or economic burden on the US. This research suggests that the withdrawal was most likely a planned and strategic move by the US to open up a new front for its adversaries, primarily China and Russia, thereby creating security and economic challenges for them. The study will critically examine the hypothesis that the US deliberately left Afghanistan to enable the Taliban to seize power, foster instability and create a situation of uncertainty and difficulty for its adversaries. This strategy would force them to focus more on maintaining peace and stability in Afghanistan, diverting resources and time. This research aims to contribute to understanding the surge of the Taliban and the sudden collapse of the Afghan government.

If China commits to investing in Afghanistan, it will have to shoulder the economic burden of rebuilding a failed and unstable country. If Russia intervenes, it diverts its ambitions from Europe. Controlled instability in the region, particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan, will ensure that US adversaries remain preoccupied with it. A chaotic Afghanistan would act as a deterrent for China and Russia. It would prevent them from expanding their influence, as they might have done when there was a relatively stable Afghanistan under US control.

There is a general trend in US foreign policy to manage its adversaries through proxies rather than direct confrontation (Groh, 2019). By withdrawing from Afghanistan without considering other major stakeholders, such as the Afghan government and NATO, the US achieved precisely what it aimed for: permitting the Taliban to overthrow the government and destabilise Afghanistan once more. An unstable Afghanistan would pose a security challenge for both Russia and China.

2. Background and context

The world order is predominantly controlled internationally by the Anglosphere. The Anglosphere consists of countries that speak English, such as the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Churchill referred to this entity as “English-speaking people” (Gill, 2004). They have been ruling the world since the 18th century. Initially, it was headed by Great Britain for over two centuries. However, by the end of World War II, GB was financially exhausted, and this led to the process of decolonisation. Most of the British colonies gained independence during the 1950s and 1960s. Also, after WWII, the US emerged as a major power on the international scene, and the Anglosphere has been headed by the US since. After the collapse of the USSR, they thought there was no other rival left to challenge their hegemony. By defeating communism, the Anglosphere emerged as a symbol of liberal internationalism and democracy at the global level (Vucetic, 2011).

However, the world had become multipolar by the start of the 21st century. Power shifted to Asia. China emerged as an economic power, and Russia started flexing its military power. For the first time, Anglo-Saxon power faced a comparative economic downturn. The current ambitions of the Anglo-Saxon powers are to foster instabilities in Central Asia, to reduce Russian influence in the region and to stop China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It will practically make China the most powerful country in the world, replacing the Anglo-Saxon empire that is against it. The BRI, initiated in 2013, aims to connect China with Asia, Europe, Africa and beyond. This will increase China’s geo-economic and geopolitical influence over most developing countries worldwide. For instance, China has pledged to invest around 62 billion dollars in various infrastructure projects under its flagship project the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Zhao, 2021). Through these strategic infrastructure projects, China will be able to dominate Eurasian connectivity and hence will have greater leverage over these countries. The US considers this a great concern and believes that China will ultimately use its economic prowess as a geopolitical power to undermine the US-led world order (Hillman, 2020).

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was portrayed as an expansion of communist rule and geopolitical influence over the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. A fictitious story propagated by the Anglosphere fitted into the broader Cold War narrative well. It was partly against communism, but not limited to it. In the long run, it was to create a front to contain both Russia and China in the 20th and 21st centuries. The Anglosphere, led by the United States, presented communism as a threat to Islam to stir up resistance against the then Soviet Union. In his book, *The Failure of Political*

Islam, Olivier Roy explains that the Islamic awakening in certain countries was not just the result of religious movements in those countries but a product of the Cold War policies (Roy, 1994).

This is a widely held belief in scholarly circles that in 2021, the United States left Afghanistan not because of the internal pressure or any defeat it was facing at the hands of the Taliban, but rather that it was well thought-out strategic plan. Russia, at the moment, is engaged in a prolonged war with Ukraine, putting a financial, military and diplomatic strain on it. The US and its allies are also trying to build pressure on Russia from other fronts to minimise Russian leverage. The chaotic withdrawal of the US and coalition forces from Afghanistan and the subsequent takeover by the Taliban means a new security challenge in the region. The US policy of providing 40 million dollars every week to the Taliban authorities also raises concerns because it is tantamount to strengthening a terrorist organisation (Sirat, 2025).

3. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative exploratory approach to examine the swift withdrawal of coalition forces from Afghanistan and the subsequent regime change, which significantly changed the regional security dynamics. The purpose of this research is not to test any existing theories of international relations but to understand the strategic motivations behind the chaotic withdrawal of the US and coalition forces from Afghanistan.

This research utilises process tracing and critical discourse analysis (CDA) as research methods. The purpose of using process tracing is to examine the decisions and factors that led to the US withdrawal and how it resulted in the swift takeover of Kabul by the Taliban (Collier, 2011). Conversely, CDA is utilised to analyse the official US discourse to reveal language that may indicate implicit strategic calculations (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). The study primarily relies on primary sources, including statements by the US government, protocols of the withdrawal and regional diplomatic moves, as well as secondary sources such as analyses by international relations pundits, relevant research and news articles. Moreover, a purposive sampling technique is adopted in the research for the purpose of selecting texts and events that are related to the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the following regime change by the Taliban.

4. Withdrawal and the collapse of the Afghan government

After the death of Osama bin Laden on 2 May 2011, during a US forces’ operation in Abbottabad, Pakistan, US President Barack Obama announced a plan to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. This plan was seen as a strategic shift from a large-scale military presence to a more focused counter-terrorism approach (BBC News, 2011).

Figure 1: A timeline of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan



Source: Author's own editing.

On 14 April 2021, the Biden administration announced a planned military withdrawal from Afghanistan, and it was completed on 30 August 2021 (Ameyaw-Brobbe, 2023). Before that, Mr Khalilzad, the chief negotiator for the US in March 2019, announced that the two parties, US and the Taliban, agreed in principle on four fundamental issues to be discussed: (1) withdrawal of American/NATO troops, (2) that the Taliban will make sure the Afghan soil will not be used against American interests, (3) intra-Afghan dialogue, (4) ceasefire (“United States Signs Agreement”, 2020). Initially, he said that either all terms of the agreement would be accepted or there would be no agreement. This was to pacify the Afghan government. However, the two parties later agreed on the first two points only, whereas the 3rd and 4th points were completely ignored in the final agreement. By going through the agreement’s text, it can be observed that it provides more specific details on achieving the first two points, whereas the last two points lack any specific details or tasks that would ensure their enforcement.

Another important point to note here is that during the years-long negotiation process that ultimately led to the Doha agreement, the Afghan state was not party to the negotiation process. This shows that the US’s intentions regarding the agreement were purely for strategic interests rather than for sustainable peace and stability in Afghanistan. The US excluded the Afghan government from the negotiation process. It undermined the legitimacy of a democratically elected government compared to a terrorist organisation. This shows that the aim was not to strengthen the government but to pave the way for the post-Ghani political setup (US House Foreign Affairs Committee, 2024).

This diplomatic oversight of the Taliban facilitated their resurgence. Not including the Afghan government in the negotiation process was tantamount to the de facto de-recognition of the Afghan government, undermining the authority of the Afghan government (Hadid, 2021). At the same time, it was a de facto recognition of the Taliban. According to the text of the Doha agreement, the Taliban would provide guarantees that Afghan soil would not be used by terrorists against American interests. Whereas at that time Taliban were not even in power. They were in Pakistan (United States & Taliban, 2020).

All of these factors weakened the state of Afghanistan and made the collapse of the government imminent. On the one hand, the exclusion of the Afghan government from the negotiation process gave the Taliban a stronger position vis-à-vis the Afghan government and, on the other hand, the abrupt withdrawal of the US and coalition forces without a credible peace plan put the Afghan security forces in jeopardy. Handing over the reins of power to an established terrorist and militant organisation in Afghanistan, and later on providing them with a consistent flow of cash, implies that the US wants to use Afghanistan and the Taliban as a strategic tool against its rivals, such as China and Russia.

Trump’s actions undermined the Afghan government by not including it in the negotiation process and ignoring its pleas. Under US pressure, the Afghan government was forced to release 5,000 Taliban fighters as part of the Doha agreement. This hugely increased the fighting capabilities of the Taliban and dented the morale of the Afghan government and its forces. Trump was so determined to leave Afghanistan to get the credit for the next election, but the way they did it led Afghanistan directly into chaos (Mashal & Faizi, 2020).

The deal boosted the Taliban’s confidence that even if they advanced rapidly, the American armed forces would not retaliate. This is why the Taliban made rapid advances towards Kabul (Boot, 2021). Additionally, the US forces left Bagram airbase, the centre of the American occupation, without coordinating with the Afghan authorities. This move by the US demoralised the Afghan security forces, leading to their complete collapse (Graham-Harrison & Beaumont, 2021). President Ghani had to flee the country, giving the perception that the Taliban takeover was not only imminent but also accepted. Ultimately, when the Taliban did surge, it was only a matter of time before the Taliban took over. Additionally, the agreement was an informal talk, not a treaty. The treaty needs to be ratified by a two-thirds majority in Congress (Constitution of the United States, 1787).

5. Outcomes and regional realignment

5.1. Institutional collapse

After the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan, the Taliban’s return to power in August 2021 resulted in an immediate collapse of the state institutions. The first casualty was the ANDSF, which imploded in just a few months. The US trained the ANDSF for almost two decades, and as it was believed that the ANDSF was now a strong and sustainable force, it happened to crumble in no time at all. The most significant factor contributing to this collapse was the haphazardly concluded peace deal and the hurried withdrawal of the US and its logistical support. This undermined their morale. Consequently, the Afghan government lost control of the majority of the area. This made it difficult for the government to maintain writ of the state (Roxanna, 2022).

As soon as the Taliban took control of Kabul, announced a new government and discarded the existing constitution, it received no formal recognition from any sovereign state or international

institutions (Muhammad & Khan, 2022). Almost 75% of the previous government's budget came from international donors. And with the regime change, it came to an abrupt halt. Additionally, the US and European countries froze around 9.5 billion dollars in assets of the Afghan central bank. This had a huge impact on the country's economy. Millions of Afghans fell below the poverty line (Smith, 2024).

The 2021 regime change in Afghanistan most drastically affected women's rights. As soon as the Taliban came into power, they banned female education, prohibited women from attending offices and enforced various other restrictions on them. This sent all of the initiatives and steps taken for women's empowerment over the last two decades back to square one. These gender-based, restrictive rules introduced by the Taliban have created an environment of uncertainty and distress among the people of Afghanistan, particularly women (UN Women, 2024).

5.2. Regional realignment

The abrupt withdrawal of the US and coalition forces from Afghanistan and allowing the Taliban to take over power resulted in a shift in the geopolitical dynamics of the region, which would prove detrimental to the strategic interests of both China and Russia. Traditionally, Afghanistan remained low on China's priority ladder; however, the power vacuum created by the US withdrawal left China with no option but to improve and expedite diplomatic relations with the Taliban, because China knew that the Taliban could play the role of regional disruptor, having links to Uyghur separatists. That is why China was among the first countries to maintain diplomatic and trade ties with the new regime. China invited a high-level delegation of the Taliban to China to discuss peace, security and trade-related issues, a significant breakthrough between the two (European Foundation for South Asian Studies, 2024).

China's main concern with the new regime is securing its borders against the extension of terrorism. China has clearly expressed its concerns to the Taliban regarding the presence of the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in Afghanistan. This group is a Muslim separatist organisation based in Xinjiang Province, which is one of the most significant internal issues for China (Fischer et al., 2021). It can seriously impede the economic development in the country by posing a security risk to Beijing and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has sought assurance from the Taliban that Afghan territory under their control will not be utilised by anti-China militant organisations (Seerat, 2024). China has proposed to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of the BRI, to Afghanistan. The three countries also agreed on reducing the Indian influence in Afghanistan, signalling a strong step towards regional realignment (Yousafzai, 2025).

Russia, on the other hand, is also actively engaging with the Taliban following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Russia fears that an unstable Afghanistan would encourage extremism and militancy in the Central Asian countries, which is against Russia's national interests. The presence of ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) is a major security concern for Russia. ISIS-K killed 149 people in an attack on a concert hall in Moscow in 2024. Since the Taliban view ISIS-K as an enemy group, it

brings Russia closer to the Taliban (Shamim, 2025). That is why Russia not only invited the Afghan Taliban delegation to Moscow but also provided a platform, the Moscow format, to discuss the future and peace process with the other countries of the region as well.

In April 2025, the Supreme Court of Russia removed the Taliban from the list of terrorist organisations to facilitate formal relations with the Taliban regime (Reuters, 2025b). It has also accredited a Taliban-appointed diplomatic mission in Russia. In a more recent development, Russia formally recognised the Taliban regime (Reuters, 2025a). This policy manifests that Russia wants to have pragmatic relations with the Taliban at a time when Western countries are taking a more cautious approach regarding them (VOA News, 2022).

China and Russia take a similar stance regarding the situation in Afghanistan. Their endeavours aim to portray the Taliban regime as a more responsible actor in the region, as they are the de facto authority in Afghanistan. Both countries are trying to develop working relations with the Taliban to maintain stability in the region and address their security challenges. Because their main agenda with the Taliban would remain confined to security cooperation (Stanzel & Fischer, 2021).

6. Conclusions

Attributing the current instability in Afghanistan solely to its internal factors would provide a narrow perspective on the reality. In actuality, Afghanistan's geographical location grants it geostrategic significance, where major powers compete for their national interests. The US and its allies, referred to as the Anglo-Saxon sphere, used Afghanistan as a strategic instrument to counter its main adversaries, such as Russia and China, to uphold their global hegemony (Pervaiz, 2013). The 20-year-long war, negotiations with a terrorist organisation and then the chaotic withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan in 2021 were all part of a grand strategy. This strategy aimed to create long-term controlled instability in the region, compelling China and Russia to divert more attention to it instead of concentrating on their economies and other regional objectives (Trenin, 2021). This not only led to institutional collapse in Afghanistan but also shifted the balance of power at international level.

This research proves that the actual motive behind the American policy of withdrawal from Afghanistan was not a strategic failure; it was an intentional move by US policymakers not just to eliminate terrorism and reconstruct the state of Afghanistan, but to create controlled instability in the region to keep its rivals, mainly China and Russia, occupied on multiple fronts (Larson, 2021). The sudden resurgence and advancement of the Afghan Taliban, the complete exclusion of the Ghani-led government from the Doha agreement and its unexpected collapse were all part of US strategic interests. The US aimed to create an order in which Afghanistan would indirectly serve American interests without having boots on the ground.

With all of these analyses, this research concludes that the collapse of the Afghan state was not due to internal pressures; instead, it was a US global strategic plan. The US intentionally disturbed

the balance of power by withdrawing its forces without any mutual agreement with NATO and the Afghan government (Hadid, 2021). At the same time, while the Taliban were marching towards Kabul and capturing territories, the US forces did not resist them. This was tantamount to backstabbing an ally. The US should have used its leverage to influence or persuade the Taliban to form an interim government before the withdrawal. Before moving on to negotiations with the Taliban, the US should have come out with a phase-based withdrawal strategy that was mutually agreed upon by NATO and the Afghan government. Anders Persson argued that, for the US, it was a strategically correct move to withdraw from Afghanistan. This would allow the US to redirect its focus to compete with China by ending a decades-long war on terror, which has been heavy on its coffers (Persson, 2021).

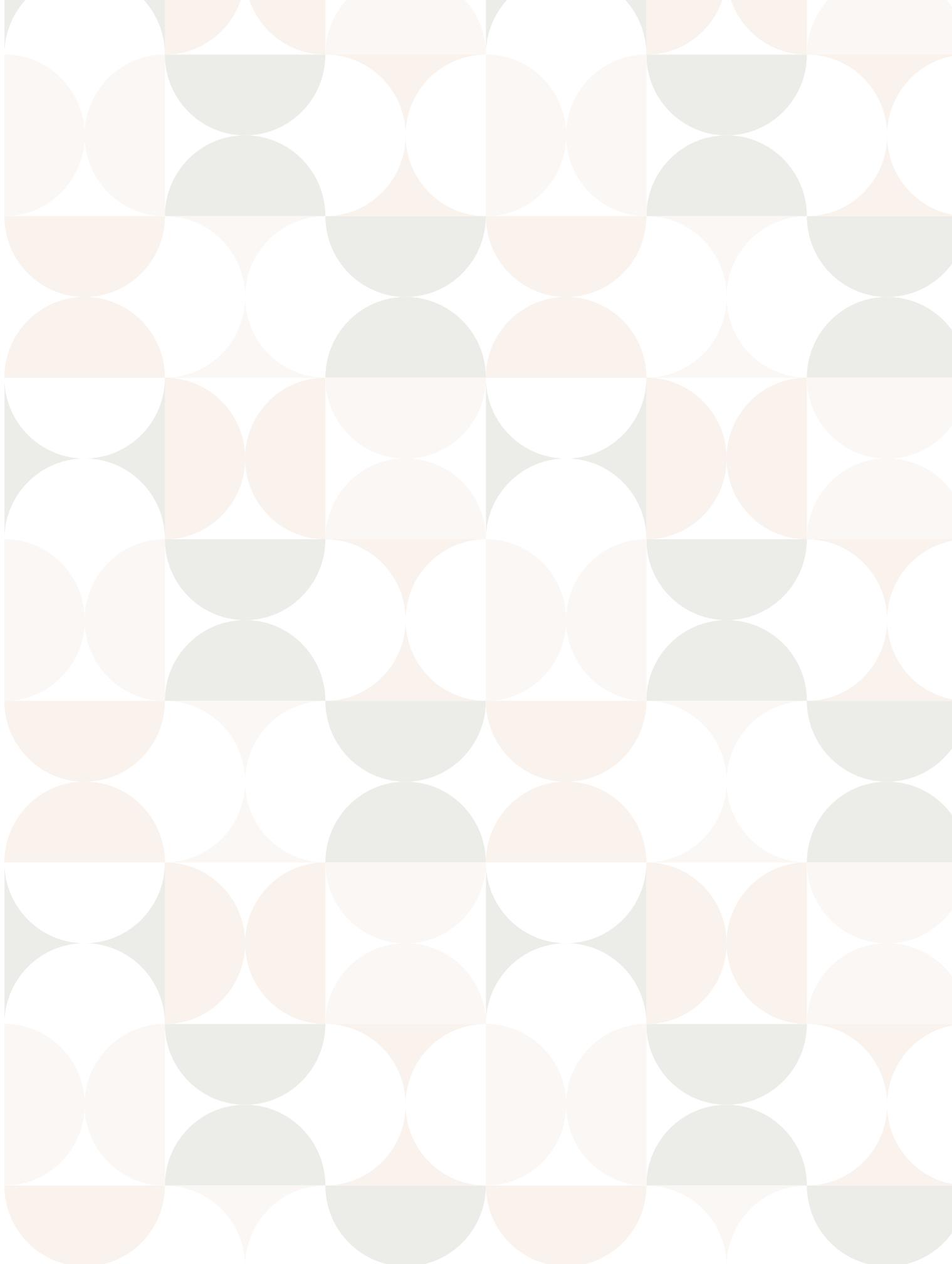
There is a general trend in US foreign policy that it controls its adversaries through proxies rather than direct confrontation with them (Groh, 2019). By withdrawing from Afghanistan without considering other major stakeholders, such as the Afghan government and NATO, the US did exactly what it wanted: allowing the Taliban to topple the government and make Afghanistan unstable again. An unstable Afghanistan would be a security challenge for Russia and China.

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**CONFERENCE
REPORT**



THE SECOND MINSK INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EURASIAN SECURITY

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Between 31 October and 1 November 2024, Belarus hosted the second edition of its flagship initiative, the Minsk International Conference on Eurasian Security. As its official aim suggests, the Conference intends to foster a “frank and inclusive discussion on the prospects for Eurasian security in the context of the existing world order crisis, chronic military and political contradictions between key global players” and address the near-total lack of communication between them. The event explored more general ideations about global order and security as well as the current most pressing security issues in global hotspots such as Ukraine, the Middle East and the South Caucasus. One significant objective of the 2024 Conference was the facilitation of the creation of a Eurasian Charter of Diversity and Multipolarity, i.e. the Eurasian Security Charter. Compared to the first edition of the event, the Conference had grown in size and managed to bring together a more diverse group of participants on a larger scale, gathering approximately 600 high-ranking officials and experts from around 45 countries.

Paradigm shift in the world order – From monocentrism to multipolarity

The 2024 edition of the Conference managed to gather more high-level political attendees than the year before for the plenary session, which prompted the articulation of more political concepts and messages. The politically most significant speeches were delivered by the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, and Sergey Lavrov, Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation. Other

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prominent speakers included Alexander Vulin, Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia, Li Hui, China’s special representative for Eurasian affairs and Péter Szijjártó, Foreign Minister of Hungary. Multiple high-level representatives of Eurasian international organisations have also made addresses at the plenary meeting entitled “Paradigm Shift in the World Order – From Monocentrism to Multipolarity.”

The plenary session was opened by Belarusian President Lukashenko, who addressed the most pressing issues for Belarus and the Eurasian region in his speech. He announced the main objective of the Minsk Conference, the preparation of a joint Eurasian Charter on Diversity and Multipolarity. Justifying the necessity of the Charter, Lukashenko reasoned that the United States could not guarantee global security after the collapse of the Soviet Union, even though it had the potential to: international institutions – which should act as universal moderators between countries – are paralysed, there is no functioning international system of checks and balances, which causes global security to degrade at political, military, economic and informational levels.

According to President Lukashenko, the erosion of political security is evidenced by attacks in the name of democracy against nation states who pursue their own paths. The attacks manifest in colourful revolutions, installing puppet governments, the destabilisation of states, or threatening sovereign leaders with the International Criminal Court of Justice. People who are willing to engage in dialogue are condemned, Lukashenko stated, citing the case of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who attended the Kazan BRICS Summit in 2024. At the same time, the so-called “democracy championed by the West” has caused deep divisions within societies. The Belarusian president put emphasis on the migration crisis, a particularly contentious issue for the country. He opined that the West first destabilised regions, then invited in the migrants and created a migration crisis in Europe, the weight of which burdens Belarus, a transit country as well. Though Western media fails to cover it, Lukashenko expressed that Polish and Lithuanian authorities commit serious offences and atrocities against migrants attempting to cross the border and forcefully push them back to Belarus. Lukashenko condemned the notion that the European Union invites in migration, expects Belarus to hold up migrating masses and proceeds to blame Minsk for not stopping them, all the while Brussels maintains an economic war against Belarus and attempts to choke it with sanctions.

As for military security, Lukashenko contended that the United States needs to rely on its military prowess more and more in order to protect its global hegemonic position and to demonstrate its dominance towards the American society. This results in the proliferation of military conflicts, with no real guarantee of global security. International law and treaties have hollowed out and become dysfunctional, which – according to the Belarusian leader – necessitates the negotiation of new ones.

Security is endangered at the level of the economy as well. Lukashenko argued that the world is moving backwards, in the direction of protectionism and closed economies. Speaking as the head of a highly sanctioned country that is a significant exporter of fertilizer, he stated that half of the world’s economies are being choked by unilaterally imposed Western sanctions for political reasons,

even if that hinders universally shared humanitarian goals of ending global hunger and hurts normal people the most in the end.

The fourth level, informational security, was deemed to be the most important by the Belarusian leader, because manipulating popular opinion, staging coups, freezing financial assets and using the media as a weapon against other countries is more dangerous than any military intervention. The president emphasised in his speech how these informational instruments are utilised whenever a state does not move according to the West's ideas, citing Georgia's case after the passing of the foreign agent law.

The speech also touched upon the war in Ukraine. President Lukashenko maintained the position that immediate, unconditional talks are needed, which Minsk is ready and willing to facilitate. Both sides are at fault in the conflict, but searching for the inciting causes should be secondary; constructive talks are needed. He raised the issue that Russia's ceasefire proposals have remained unanswered, with no alternative ideas being proposed by the West, highlighting how the West is not interested in a constructive end to the conflict but only in saving face, even at the peril of Ukraine's complete destruction.

After having expanded upon the multiple levels of security crises in the Western-led, unipolar world order, the Belarusian president proposed creating alternative systems and mechanisms through which the non-Western part of the world can represent its own interests. Though Eurasia is the key megaregion of the world, especially in terms of security, only Russia and China propose initiatives for collective Eurasian security which are not considered and supported in the Western part of Europe. Lukashenko has repeatedly emphasised that Minsk is ready to play a constructive role in Eurasian security, willing to facilitate peace in the Russo-Ukrainian war as well.

Alexander Vulin, Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia, has criticised NATO and the West in his address, asserting that it has repeatedly breached the Minsk and Brussels Agreements, and stated that a new historic moral consensus is needed on the Eurasian continent, underlining the credibility crisis between the West and "the Rest". Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó's speech has highlighted the double standards of the European Union, pointing out the hypocrisy of promoting sanctions and decoupling from Russian energy while several EU nations continue imports of Russian oil and gas via back channels. Szijjártó called for more pragmatism over ideological policies, stressing the dangers of a polarised and divided global order and advocating for recognition of complex interdependencies and the pursuit of connectivity.

Sergey Lavrov's address summarised the main objectives of Russian foreign policy, contending that multipolarisation is a natural and irreversible process. An international system is needed where there is no single hegemon and which is based on the sovereign equality of states and the principles of the UN Charter. Russian ideations of an extended Eurasian partnership are based on cooperation and liberalisation and reject bloc building and neocolonialism. Lavrov criticised NATO, stating that it propagates a notion of security that is based on dominance and deterrence, causing the conflict in Ukraine. He blamed NATO for attempting to turn the whole of Eurasia into a battlefield through

the creation of military-like blocs such as AUKUS. Instead, what is needed is the harmonisation of existing international treaties, institutions and organisations under an overarching architecture, alluding to the Belarusian idea of the Eurasian Security Charter. Lavrov also spoke of bilateral relations between Russia and Belarus, stating that a mutual defence agreement will be signed between the two countries, similar to the comprehensive strategic partnership treaty signed between Russia and North Korea in June 2024.

Li Hui, China's special representative for Eurasian affairs, underlined that the risk of escalation the proliferation of conflicts is growing, therefore, a global security initiative is needed instead of exclusive defence mechanisms. According to the Chinese perspective, this should be built on six main principles: joint, complete, non-exclusive security and sustainable peace; respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states; respecting the values and principles set forth in the UN Charter; respecting the justified security concerns of states and rejection of military blocs; peaceful resolution of conflicts; and finally, harmonisation of traditional and non-traditional forms of security. Li confirmed that China is willing to take on a mediator role with Chinese characteristics.

After the addresses of high-level political figures, representatives of Eurasian international organisations took to the floor to share their views on Eurasian security. CSTO Secretary General Imangali Tasmagambetov has asserted that a new arms race has commenced, and new security mechanisms, multiple-level political consultation and regional cooperation are needed in order to resolve conflicts. The Secretary General also expressed that middle powers aim to play a more active role in international relations and in the Global South to different platforms such as the Astana International Forum, BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Sergey Lebedev, Secretary General of the Commonwealth of Independent States, has contended that a new security architecture is needed since the current one was ruptured by the end of the bipolar order, the revaluation of fundamental multilateral agreements and unilateral, protectionist policies by certain states. The CIS is coordinating with CSTO, SCO, ASEAN and GCC as well, aiming to harmonise cooperation in Eurasia.

SCO Deputy Secretary General Nurlan Yermekbayev noted in his remarks that intra-SCO collaboration could serve as a foundation for forging the system of equal and indivisible security in Eurasia. He added that regionalisation, rather than globalisation, is now topping the agenda, with the role of regional and transregional associations and their ability to influence the resolution of numerous issues becoming increasingly relevant.

Also notable were the remarks made by State Secretary of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, Dmitry Mezentsev, who emphasised the need to create a new concept of a world order, a key task of the Conference. Western leaders do not wish to take part in creating a peaceful world order, he said, instead they exert unprecedented levels of pressure on Russia, Belarus and others, the primary instrument of which is the proliferation of NATO bases. Mezentsev stated that the West's objective is to balance Russia with Ukraine, citing US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski's thesis that "without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire." The Union State Secretary imparted that

Russia and Belarus would sign an agreement that includes the protection of the borders of the Union State, building on the notion that every threat against the Union State equals threatening Russia itself.

Building trust and security in Eurasia

Expert-level working sessions were held on the following day of the Conference, aiming to outline the contours of Eurasian security and discuss the concepts of multipolarity and diversity. The objective of the expert-level panels was also to facilitate the actualisation of a Eurasian Security Charter. The first working session entitled “Building trust and security in Eurasia” explored security challenges in Eurasia from the perspectives of experts from the Westernmost side of Europe to Southeast Asia.

The standout presentation of the panel was made by Azerbaijani politician Gulshan Pashayeva who spoke of the geopolitical situation of the South Caucasus. In her address, she contended that in the current shifting world order, the region is essential for both East-West and North-South connectivity. However, the sides that propagate these directions of connectivity hold opposing views of the world order, which creates insecurity for the region due to the risk of foreign intervention. For this reason, the region must act as a geopolitical unit, which naturally necessitates the overcoming of conflicts and divisions between the countries of the region. This, in Pashayeva’s opinion, could be carried out via the following three principles. First, regional security should not be guaranteed through outside actors to the detriment of each other. Second, foreign meddling in the region’s and individual South Caucasian countries’ affairs should be rejected. Third, the principle of positive irreplaceability in the economic realm should be realised. If the level of economic cooperation between regional states is high enough, the risk of conflict is minimalised because of the substantial economic costs – therefore, economic interconnectivity could guarantee security.

The Eurasian Charter of Diversity and Multipolarity

The last working session was designed to facilitate brainstorming about the Eurasian Security Charter. Vadim Pisarevich, Deputy Head of the Directorate General for Multilateral Diplomacy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, began the discussion with his keynote address, in which he laid down the most important attributes for the Charter. The key vision behind the Charter is that the lack of functioning global collective security architecture necessitates a Eurasian security system. The Charter would be based on the principles set forth in the United Nations Charter as well as in international treaties such as the 1975 Helsinki Protocol and the 1955 Bandung Declaration. In order to realise the Eurasian Charter, existing security and economic mechanisms would be used and new ones should be created, channelling participants’ visions, initiatives. Cooperation should be promoted with other regions; however, foreign intervention in Eurasian affairs should be rejected. The Charter should be negotiated collectively, in a way that all parties’ interests are represented.

Any Eurasian country can join the Charter, and any country or international organisation can facilitate the negotiation of it. The main objective of the Eurasian Charter is to promote diversity, multipolarity and dialogue, assisting Eurasian countries and peoples in realising their interests; and to facilitate the creation of a pan-Eurasian security architecture and Eurasian economic integration. The Eurasian Charter is not meant to be a duplication of the UN Charter, nor would it aim to replace it, for it rather embraces its principles; nevertheless, it has become clear that in the present context, the UN Charter is not enough. Regional instruments are therefore needed for security.

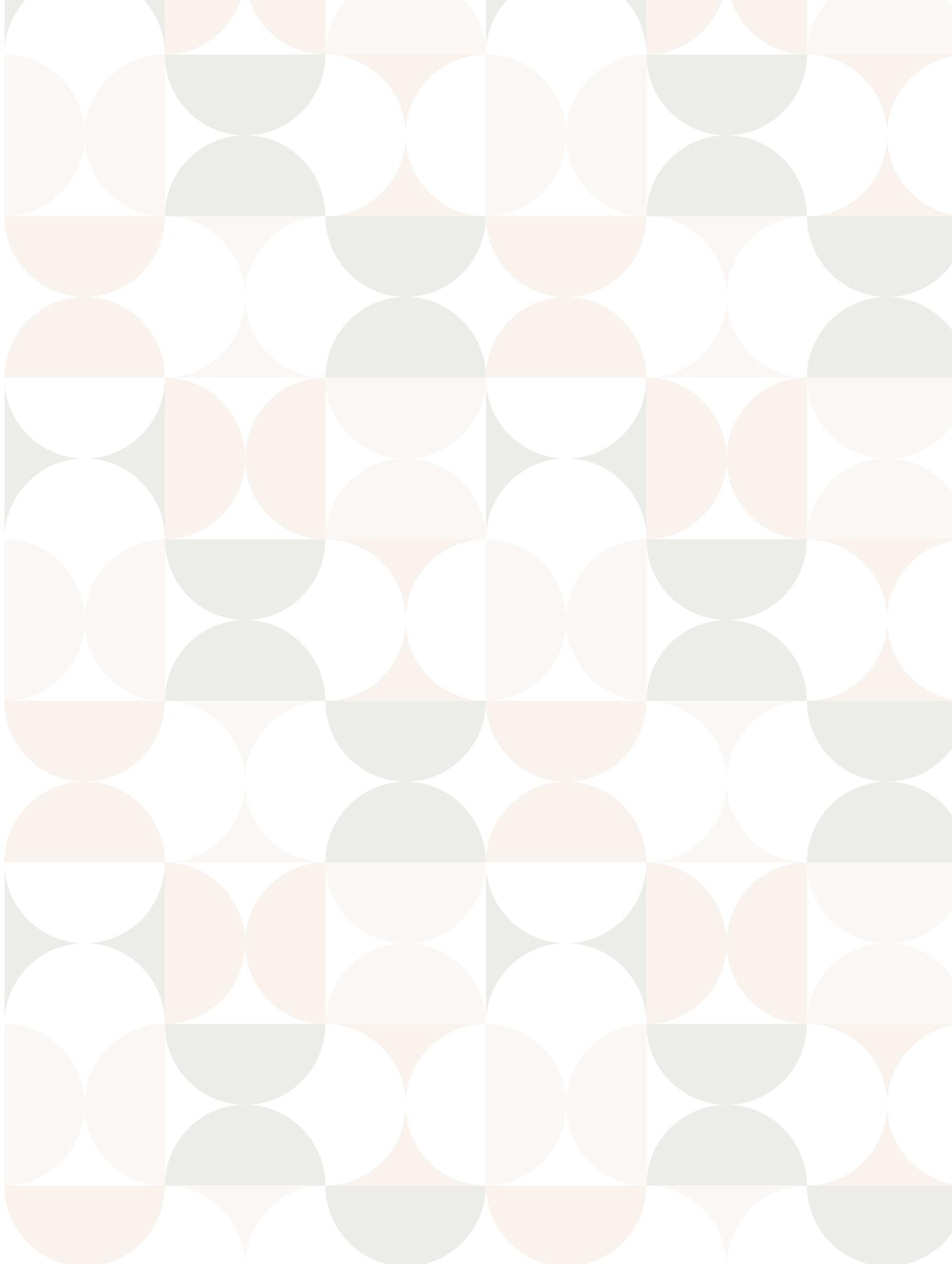
Alexander Tromifov, Deputy Director of the Department of Foreign Policy Planning at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs contended that Moscow shares the goal of creating a unifying Eurasian Charter that is based on the sovereign equality of nations. According to the Russian perspective, multipolarity could ensure a world with fewer conflicts where the unique identity of nations is preserved and all have an equal opportunity to develop. Therefore, according to Tromifov’s remarks, peaceful coexistence and cooperation should be based on the indivisibility of security.

Ilyaz Huseynov, political expert from Azerbaijan, asserted that Western European countries need to be part of the Eurasian Charter. Ravi Batra, American economist, opined that the successful creation of the Charter would carry more weight than what is written in it. Hervé Juvin, French politician and former Member of the European Parliament, expressed criticism that multipolarity opposes the sovereign equality of nations. Experts from China have contended that for the Charter, it needs to be specified what Eurasia means – the whole of the Eurasian continent or only the post-Soviet region – and whom its intended audience is. Non-traditional security matters also should be included in the Charter.

The continued pursuit of dialogue

As President Lukashenko remarked in his keynote speech at the high-level plenary session, the Minsk International Conference on Eurasian Security continues into 2025, evidencing the ambition to position Minsk as a significant regional player and facilitator of dialogue across Eurasia. While the Conference has not been long-standing, its existence and growth so far clearly signals a desire of non-Western Eurasian states to channel alternative visions of international order and security mechanisms, reflecting the current state of international institutions and visible shifts from a unipolar liberal world order towards multipolarity. The Conference is also a testament to the credibility crisis between the Western and non-Western world, evidencing the need for more dialogue between both sides.

BOOK REVIEW



MEHMET SARAÇ, MOHAMMED KABIR HASSAN (EDS.): ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE FOR SUSTAINABLE FINANCIAL SYSTEM

LÁSZLÓ SÁRKÁNY¹

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The book *Islamic Perspective for Sustainable Financial System* explores how sustainability is embedded in Islamic economics. This book presents sustainability as an inherent concept within Islamic economics and finance, examining how Islamic principles can promote a circular economy and support the SDGs. It includes chapters that highlight the foundational concepts of sustainability in Islamic finance, alongside country-specific implementation examples and policy recommendations for governments and firms.

¹ László Sárkány, Research Fellow, Eurasia Center, John von Neumann University, Hungary.

The importance of the book

The real-world free-market economies have long been driven by the linear economy paradigm in which the ecological environment is not recognised as a resource. The linear process, a natural consequence of capitalism, has caused the rapid exhaustion of the resources for the sake of “development”. Following serious environmental catastrophes and financial crises, the common sense of the world has admitted that there are problems with conventional economics and has begun to search for more “sustainable” economic and financial systems. The idea that firms should operate in a manner where they provide dignified living to people and consider the needs of future generations has become widespread, especially in the last three decades. Termed as the “stakeholder approach”, this understanding contributed to paving the way for the notion of “sustainability”, which calls for the taking of measures to solve the fundamental problems such as income and wealth inequality, poverty, corruption, climate change and the disappearance of animal species.

Contrary to capitalist or socialist understanding and practice, Islamic economics is already guided by the motivation of comprehensive development and its preservation in a “universal and sustainable manner”, as manifested in the objectives of Islamic Law (Maqasid al-Shariah). Islamic economics is based on the “circular manner” which prevents the exhaustion of resources and environmental disasters.

The book emphasises how Maqasid al-Shariah (the higher objectives of Islamic law) already incorporate the principles of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), making Islamic finance a natural partner in achieving global sustainability, offering a unique ethical and spiritual framework for global sustainability. It highlights how Islamic finance can address poverty, promote financial inclusion, foster responsible environmental practices and drive infrastructure development, thereby providing a holistic model for both Muslim and non-Muslim nations seeking a more equitable and ecologically sound economic future.

Works exploring the Islamic perspective on a sustainable financial system are providing extensive information on Islamic finance, its underlying principles and its role in sustainable development, emphasising social equity, wealth distribution and environmentally friendly practices, but *Islamic Perspective for Sustainable Financial System* is unique in that it is providing a holistic model for both Muslim and non-Muslim nations seeking a more equitable and ecologically sound economic future.

Structure of the book

The structure of the book involves a theoretical introduction to sustainability within Islamic economics and finance, followed by analyses of key principles such as Maqasid al-Shariah, asset-backed financing and the prohibition of interest (riba) and excessive uncertainty (gharar). It then explores the practical applications and roles of Islamic financial institutions, including banks, sukuk (Islamic bonds) and zakat and waqf (Islamic social finance) in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The book also includes case studies, an examination of the circular economy and recommendations for integrating Islamic finance into sustainable development efforts.

Key sections and themes

Foundational principles

- Sustainability in Islamic economics: The book establishes the inherent connection between sustainability and the ethical foundations of Islamic economics and finance.
- Maqasid al-Shariah: This section explains how the objectives of Islamic law provide a strong framework for achieving the SDGs.
- Islamic financial principles: Discussion on key principles such as the prohibition of interest (riba), uncertainty (gharar) and gambling (maysir), along with an emphasis on risk-sharing and asset-backed financing.
- Institutional roles and instruments
- Islamic banking: Analysis of the role of Islamic banks in promoting sustainable development.
- Sukuk (Islamic bonds): Exploration of how sukuk can mobilise funds for sustainable projects.
- Social finance (Zakat & Waqf): Examination of Islamic social finance institutions and their potential to support SDGs.

Practical applications and implementation

- SDG linkages: How Islamic finance can contribute to achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.
- Circular economy: The book discusses the circular economy paradigm and how Islamic principles align with its goals.
- Case studies: Practical examples from different countries demonstrating the implementation of Islamic finance in supporting sustainable development.
- Firm-level sustainability: The book addresses how Islamic firms can adhere to sustainability principles alongside Shariah compliance.

Future directions

- Policy recommendations: Practical recommendations are provided to maximise the impact of Islamic finance on sustainable development.
- Reforms and potential: Suggestions for institutional reforms and the strategic use of technology to enhance the role of Islamic finance in sustainability efforts.

Short assessment

Three prominent examples of the characteristics of Islamic economics that distinguish it from the capitalist understanding relate to the concepts of private ownership, consumption and charity. While the unique creator Allah (SWT) has absolute ownership, human beings, as the vicegerents of Allah in this world, possess the wealth as His trustee. The custodial characteristic of the ownership concept

burdens human beings with strict responsibilities. Islam clearly bans waste and orders the efficient use of resources. In a true Islamic economy the resources and wealth are equitably distributed and a charity mechanism functions well. Lending is considered as a means of charity, rather than a business to make money. In sum, the development goal in Islamic economics is strictly characterised by its universality and sustainability.

The book *Islamic Perspective for Sustainable Financial System* elaborates on the concept of sustainability from the perspective of Islamic economics and finance. It essentially presents how sustainability, which has recently been considered important by the developed non-Muslim world, is already an embedded phenomenon in Islamic economics and finance. The book is a valuable contribution to this, presenting the concept of sustainable development within Islamic economics and finance, then pointing out more specific dimensions and implementations in selected countries.

What makes *Islamic Perspective for Sustainable Financial System* distinctive is that the authors are not just idle observers, but also offering useful advice to the governments in Muslim countries and the management of those financial and non-financial firms, known for their observance of Islamic principles will truly adopt the SDGs that will lead towards the circular economy paradigm and the entire world would notice the pioneer role of principles of Islamic finance in achieving these goals.

The book is highly readable while presenting how sustainability, which has recently been considered important by the developed non-Muslim world, is already an embedded phenomenon in Islamic economics and finance, thus offering global cooperation between the Muslim and non-Muslim world.

It is therefore useful not only to professionals but also to academics and the general public worldwide, not only in the Islamic countries.

INFORMATION FOR AUTHORS

Eurázsia Szemle is the principal outlet for scholarly articles on Eurasia in Hungary, embracing a wide range of academic disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, and economics. Accredited by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and edited at John von Neumann University's Eurasia Center, the journal covers all aspects of Eurasian Studies, from emphasis on theory formulation to empirical research. As a peer-reviewed, multidisciplinary journal, it publishes original research findings, critical literature reviews, case studies, commentaries, and book reviews.

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