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2025: A Reset IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

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International Affairs Forum

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2025 - A Reset or Paradigm Shift?

Dr. Jonathan Gorry
Nottingham Trent University, United Kingdom

What to make of 2025? Something qualitatively different or simply new wine in an old and much abused bottle? A re-set or paradigm shift? What to make of all this noise and terrible drama? Exceptional times or State of Exception? What is to be said?

The Book of Ecclesiastes once taught there is 'nothing new under the sun', and Marx usefully reminds us that 'history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce'. The first quarter of 2025 has undoubtedly been full of suffering, violence, and anxiety. Yet in truth this has only sharply accelerated the existing practices of 2024. That war as 'politics by other means' is still the preferred sword used to shape policy in Europe (Russia, Ukraine), the Middle East (Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen), Africa (Sudan, Congo), and Asia (Myanmar). The drones still fly, the missiles still land, and the tanks still roll. Storms, hunger, fires, and earthquakes continue to take lives, livelihoods, and hope. Preventable and treatable diseases continue to steal millions of children from their parents. From this perspective, life is as 'nasty, brutish, and short' for many on this planet as it was in 2024 and indeed every year prior to this. And yet. And yet admittedly it feels, sounds, and looks different to your nicely privileged, cosmopolitan commentor. What is certainly different is that the U.S. and its allies are feeling the strain, unpredictability, and chaos. It feels a very different world to those of us schooled in post-45 multilateralism under the leadership of Pax Americana.

2025 feels like a world turned on its head by the unleashing of a tsunami of behaviors and a new optics (impressively) articulated by 'The Donald'. The desirability of ethics, justice, and peaceful coexistence appear to have been rudely elbowed aside in favor of a freshly expressed legitimacy in might-is-right, zero-sum gaming, and 'The Art of the Deal'. Power politics and the 'war of all against all' is not only rehabilitated but articulated as the only honest, common-sense understanding of what we are and how we are. Parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, and liberalism seem to be 'old hat' – more of a story of yesterday than of today. Tariffs, nativism, isolationism, and 'make them pay' the order of a brave new world. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer bemoans the abandonment of allies, the rise of autocracies, and the end of globalization is declared. Stock markets spin, the dollar tanks, bond yields are elevated. Bizarrely, Europe looks to Beijing to uphold the rule of law and the Washington Consensus. Untruths, 'bending the knee', and bullying seem par for the (golf) course in this particular and unfolding Game of Thrones. If Ukraine 'asked for it', what's wrong with Canada as the 51st state, Greenland as the 52nd, and Panama as the sixth major U.S. territory? Nobody really cares if Taiwan or South Korea are invaded. Or so it seems and some say. Should we now reach for our Carl Schmitt rather than Edward Said? But let us not think having answers to those who pose such questions is a bad thing or something to shy away from. Harold Macmillan was right to say "jaw, jaw is always better than war, war."

The fear and anxiety generated by these first few months of 2025 reminds me of those dark days that followed 9/11. Did 9/11 constitute re-set or paradigm shift?

The fear and anxiety generated by these first few months of 2025 reminds me of those dark days that followed 9/11. Did 9/11 constitute re-set or paradigm shift? The narrative for many was that the world would never be the same again. On one hand it wasn't, the events of 9/11 reshaped the global response to terrorism and fostered the hubris that the End of History would come through force; on the other hand, it concurrently raised troubling questions about security, the nature of Western values, human rights, and the treatment of prisoners. 9/11 encouraged surges in discrimination, profiling, and hate crimes. But these were not new crimes or an invention created by 9/11. The War on Terror changed lives but to the mothers whose sons (American, British, Afghani, Iraqi et al) that were killed, lost or maimed, it didn't really matter much what those of us who are students of International Affairs thought and think. As with so much, and just as it has always been, it depends on your standing and where you are standing. A sense of perspective, faith, and a grasp of the cyclical nature of history is always useful. Perhaps what is also meaningful, however, when navigating these times is to remember Pope Francis' words on the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall: "we need bridges, not walls". Re-set for 2025 is the right word to use. The re-set of the re-set will surely come. Walls crumble, the bridges still stand. Keep Calm and Carry On as the pre-war British propaganda posters proclaimed in 1939.

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Russia: Not Weak, but Not So Strong Either

Professor Emeritus Mark N. Katz
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In May 2002, while still in his first term as president of Russia, Vladimir Putin attributed the following quote to Winston Churchill: "Russia was never so strong as it wants to be and never so weak as it is thought to be."

From the vantage point of today, Russia might not appear to be weak. But it certainly isn't as strong as Putin wants it to be.

During 2024, Russian forces made advances in its war with Ukraine despite large-scale Western military supplies. On the other hand, Russia was not able to force Ukraine to capitulate.

Despite Western economic sanctions, the Russian economy remained relatively resilient. Indeed, Russia was able to circumvent Western sanctions through trade (including in Western goods) with numerous countries in the Global South (such as China, India, Turkiye, the United Arab Emirates, and others). On the other hand, the inflation rate in Russia rose to 10.1% in February 2024 and does not appear to be diminishing.

Russia has continued to expand its influence in several African countries via armed fighters in the Africa Corps (the renamed Wagner Group) which has displaced French and American military advisers. The Africa Corps, though, has been no more successful at helping African governments defeat jihadist opposition forces than French and American military advisers were.

At the outset of 2025, the prospects for Russia to become stronger appear to have improved. While the downfall of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024 – which Moscow and Tehran had long supported – was definitely a setback, the willingness of the new Syrian government to allow Russia to keep its naval and air bases in Syria for the time being was a most welcome development.

Similarly, the return of Donald Trump to the White House in January 2025 launched a dramatic change in American foreign policy. Whereas Joe Biden rallied Congress and America's allies to isolate Moscow and arm Kyiv after Russia's war against Ukraine began in February 2022, Trump has called into question continued American support for Ukraine while pursuing improved relations with Russia.

Inflation and other economic problems remain a concern for Putin, but Moscow continues to trade via China and other countries—and may hope that trade with the West might resume if Trump really does lower U.S. economic sanctions against Russia.

Russia's relative good fortune at present, though, seems highly dependent on decisions made by others. European support for Ukraine appears set to continue even if American support does not—and in early 2025, Trump's suspension of U.S. military assistance did not last long. And while the new Syrian government has indicated its willingness to discuss Russia retaining its naval and air bases, it is not clear whether they will reach an agreement. If not, Russia's military activities in Africa

The repressive capacity of Putin's regime appears to remain undiminished.

will become more difficult (but not impossible to sustain) without the use of its Syrian bases. Russia's manpower advantage against Ukraine bodes well for Putin. But there is a risk that Trump's ceasefire efforts might raise hopes among Russia's beleaguered troops about the conflict ending soon which, if dashed, could make Moscow's continued control over its soldiers at the front more problematic.

The repressive capacity of Putin's regime appears to remain undiminished. However, with the fall of Assad and the return of Trump, Putin seems to have lost the apparent monopoly he once had on launching unexpected initiatives such as his successful surprise attacks on Georgia in 2008, Crimea in 2014, and Ukraine in 2022. For better or worse, the mercurial Trump, with his dramatic threats and equally dramatic reversals, has stolen the limelight from him. Regarding Ukraine, while Trump's suspension of U.S. military and intelligence support to Kyiv was welcome in Moscow, his quick resumption of it was not. If Putin thought that Trump was simply going to stop supporting Ukraine, then he miscalculated. Similarly, European determination to continue supporting Ukraine even if the U.S. commitment to Kyiv decreases may have been a surprise to those in Moscow who believed in the Russian propaganda image of European governments being mere puppets of Washington.

Despite its many problems, Russia has shown that it is not weak, but rather resilient instead. Still, it is not as strong as Putin would like Russia to be either.

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During 2017, Professor Katz was a visiting scholar first at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (January-March) and at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs in Helsinki (April-September). During 2018, he was a Fulbright Scholar at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London (January-March) and the Sir William Luce Fellow at Durham University in the U.K. (April-June). In February 2019, he was appointed a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council.

The Day After: European Order in the Aftermath of the Russian-Ukrainian War

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Currently, discussions about European security focus on whether and how the Russian-Ukrainian War could be terminated. However, there has not been any meaningful discussion about what will happen after the war is terminated. In other words, if the war finishes - and especially if its outcome is favorable to Moscow - what would the future relations between Russia and the rest of Europe be?

Unfortunately, the Russian-Ukrainian War not only has heightened emotions throughout Europe but has also surfaced past debates about cultural, civilizational, ideological, and even racial differences between Russia and Europe. This has not only made the resolution of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict extremely difficult but has also raised the question of how the future European order would look like. Thus, the purpose of this article is to explore the various types of order that could potentially shape the future Europe-Russia relations (political, security, and economic). To this end, four models are identified: the 'Iron Curtain', the 'détente', the 'common security', and the 'great power management' model.

The 'Iron Curtain' Model

The term 'Iron Curtain' was used as a political metaphor to describe the political and physical boundary dividing Europe into two separate areas from the end of the Second World War until the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. On the east side of the Iron Curtain were the countries that were connected to or influenced by the Soviet Union, while on the west side were the countries that were NATO members, or connected to/influenced by the United States. As a result, separate international economic and military alliances were developed on each side of the Iron Curtain.

Given the nature of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict as a proxy war between the West and Russia, one could easily imagine that the end of the hostilities could lead to the establishment of a new 'Iron Curtain' in Europe, which would separate entirely Russia from the rest of Europe. Both sides in the proxy war (with the possible exception of the United States) mistrust each other to the point that makes it currently impossible to think of 'normalizing' their relations. In addition, the harsh rhetoric employed by many European officials prevent any meaningful diplomatic exchange between the two sides. Moreover, both sides speak of strengthening their respective militaries to deal with the threats they pose to each other thereby increasing the power-security dilemma they are faced with.

As during the Cold War, the new 'Iron Curtain' would take physical shape in the form of border defenses between Russia and the majority of the NATO and EU member states. These might become some of the most heavily militarized areas in the world. For example, during the Cold War, the border zone in Hungary started 15 kilometres (9.3 mi) from the border. Citizens could only enter the area if they lived in the zone or had a passport valid for traveling out. Traffic control points and patrols enforced this regulation. Those who lived within the 15 kilometres (9.3 mi) border-zone needed special permission to enter the area within 5 kilometres (3.1 mi) of the border. The area was very difficult to approach and heavily fortified. In the 1950s and 1960s, a double barbed-wire fence was installed 50 metres (160 ft) from the border. The space between the two fences was laden with land mines. The minefield was later

replaced with an electric signal fence (about 1 kilometre (0.62 mi) from the border) and a barbed wire fence, along with guard towers and a sand strip to track border violations. Regular patrols sought to prevent escape attempts. They included cars and mounted units. Guards and dog patrol units watched the border 24/7 and were authorized to use their weapons to stop escapees. The wire fence nearest the actual border was irregularly displaced from the actual border, which was marked only by stones. Anyone attempting to escape would have to cross up to 400 metres (1,300 ft) before they could cross the actual border. Mobility from east to west of the Iron Curtain, except under limited circumstances, was effectively halted after 1950.

One could easily imagine that similar measures might be taken by both sides if the Iron Curtain model is adopted. Restricting communication and mobility has the potential of cancelling each other's cultures and interest in each other's achievements. Instead, lack of communication and mobility would give rise to political and economic mythology and re-writing of history. As a result, the adoption of the 'Iron Curtain' model would have significant implications for European (in)security. In other words, replacing a 'hot war' with a highly tensed 'cold war' is not a prescription that could effectively address the question of European security.

The Détente Model

The term 'détente' refers to the period of the easing of Cold War tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The era was characterized by increased trade and cooperation with the Soviet Union and the signing of a series of treaties to address the threat posed by nuclear weapons. In his inaugural address, U.S. President Richard Nixon proclaimed, "We are entering an era of negotiation," and he went on to say:

> "We seek an open world—open to ideas, open to the exchange of goods and people—a world in which no people, great or small, will live in angry isolation....Those who would be our adversaries, we invite to a peaceful competition—not in conquering territory or extending dominion but in enriching the life of man" (cited in the US Office of the Historian)

In May 1972, President Nixon travelled to Moscow to meet the Soviet officials. While there, they discussed matters such as arms limitation, prevention of nuclear war, and increased trade between the United States and the Soviet Union.

In practical terms, détente led to formal agreements on arms control and the security of Europe. A clear sign that a détente was emerging was found in the signing of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968. Then, in 1972, the first round of Strategic Arms Limitations Talk (SALT) yielded the Antiballistic Missile Treaty along with an interim agreement setting caps on the number of intercontinental ballistic missiles each side could develop. At mid-decade, in 1975, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe emerged from two years of intense negotiations to sign the Helsinki Act, which recognized political borders, established military confidence building measures, created opportunities for trade and cultural exchange, and promoted human rights.

Unlike, the 'Iron Curtain' model, the adoption of the 'détente' model would have a more positive impact on European security. First of all, it would provide the fertile ground for the easing of the relations between the two sides involved in the Russian-Ukrainian War. This would gradually allow for greater interaction between them and the re-establishment of diplomatic, political, security, and economic relations, which have been severely damaged during the war. Yet, the easing of communication and mobility among governments and people would not only prevent further political and cultural divisions in Europe but help to address the power-security dilemma facing both sides.

The 'Common Security' Model

A dilemma, by definition, is worse than a problem. The latter is a situation involving two or more states which is difficult to deal with or overcome. A dilemma poses a different degree of difficulty. It is "a situation necessitating a choice between two equal, especially equally undesirable, alternatives" (Wheeler and Booth, 1992, p. 29). In other words, seeking security for themselves, states have to choose between two alternative policies. But because they do not really know what the motives of their rivals are, they cannot predict the outcomes of their choice in advance.

Because they can only speculate, both alternatives have the same chances of failure (Schelling, 1960; Herz 1950). In this sense their dilemma is a problem which seems incapable of satisfactory solution.

This situation currently finds its best expression in discussions regarding the termination of the Russia-Ukrainian War where each side in the conflict seeks security for itself but cannot predict outcomes of their choice in advance. Historical differences and growing mistrust between them make the situation even more salient.

The deployment of military instruments by states gives rise to two types of threat: those from the weapons themselves and those from the fact that weapons are in the hands of other states. The first threat gives rise to the "defense dilemma", which refers to the contradictions between the pursuit of military defense and national security. The second threat is of defeat and it gives rise to the "power-security dilemma".

Power-security dilemmas arise from the inherent ambiguity of some military postures and some foreign policy intentions. It is the direct result of the difficulty governments have of unambiguously determining what is defensive and what is not. According to Nicholas Wheeler and Ken Booth (1992, p. 31), a power-security dilemma exists

> "when the military preparations of one state create an unresolvable uncertainty in the mind of another as to whether those preparations are for defensive purposes only (to enhance its security in an uncertain world) or whether they are for offensive purposes (to change the status quo to its advantage)."

In this context, and due to the high degree of hostility and mistrust between the two sides, the war settlement and the subsequent order in Europe are both affected negatively by the fact that the foreign policy intentions/motives and the ambiguity of military postures taken by both sides give birth to a very powerful power-security dilemma.

According to Barry Buzan (1991, p. 186), because security is relational, one cannot understand the national security of any given state or the security of a set of states (i.e., NATO and EU) without understanding the international pattern of security interdependence in which it/they is/are embedded. In other words, due to the fact that their security is relational and their individual securities are interdependent, Russia and the West cannot address their power-security dilemmas without understanding each other's security problematique.

Following Buzan's definition, Europe can be defined as "a distinct and significant sub-system of security relations that exists among a set of states whose fate is that they have been locked into geographical proximity with each other" (Buzan, 1991, p. 188). The definition of regional systems is usually based on the existence of the mechanism by which threats, particularly political and military ones, are mostly felt when they are at close range. Therefore, when we speak of European security, we have, by definition, to include Russia. Due to the operation of the power-security dilemma, this implies that the security of Russia ought to be considered. If security guarantees are needed for Ukraine, so they are needed for Russia for otherwise we would be in a position of permanent insecurity.

According to Buzan, security is a broader idea than power, and it has the useful feature of incorporating much of the insight that derives from the analysis of power. Thus, in defining regional security, the principal element that Buzan adds to power relations is the pattern of amity and enmity among states (Buzan, 1991, p. 189). Amity refers to relations among states ranging from genuine friendship to expectations of protection or support, while enmity refers to relations set by suspicion and fear. Between the extremes of amity and enmity exists a broad band of indifference and/or neutrality, in which amity and enmity are either too weak to matter much, or else mixed in a way that produces no clear leaning one way or the other. Moreover, enmity can be particularly durable when it acquires a historical character between peoples, as it has between the Greeks and the Turks or between the Arabs and the Israelis. One could also argue that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought onto the surface historical enmity relations between Russians and Europeans.

Patterns of amity and enmity can, therefore, define regional security sub-systems that are substantially confined within some particular

The Russian-Ukrainian War has made it clear that a European security complex exists, which includes Russia, as well as the United States and Canada since they are both NATO member states.

geographical area. The term 'security complex' is used by Buzan to label the resulting formations. A security complex is defined as "a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another" (Buzan, 1991, p. 190; Buzan and Waever, 2003). The principal factor defining a security complex is a high level of threat/fear which is felt mutually among two or more states. These states will usually be close neighbors. Buzan's approach has the advantage of indicating both the character of the attribute that defines the set (security), and the notion of intense interdependence that distinguishes any particular set from its neighbors. In other words, security complexes emphasize the interdependence of rivalry, as well as that of shared interests.

All things being equal, Europe constitutes a security complex because the European states' primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another. The Russian-Ukrainian War has made it clear that a European security complex exists, which includes Russia, as well as the United States and Canada since they are both NATO member states.

Geographical proximity and security interdependence make it imperative to address the security concerns of both sides. The answer to the question of how this can be done leads to the adoption of a 'common security' model.

The 'common security' model is based on the idea that the security of states, and especially those of rival states, is indivisible. Therefore, common security emphasizes that a state's security is best achieved by cooperating with others, recognizing that no country can achieve sustainable security solely through unilateral actions. It prioritizes building trust, resolving conflicts peacefully, and addressing shared threats like climate change and inequality. This approach contrasts with a purely nationalistic view of security, where a state's own interests are prioritized.

As a result, common security emphasizes that national security is intertwined with the security of other states. A country's own security is enhanced when its neighbours and partners are also secure. In the context of the Russia-West conflict and since security is indivisible, this means that if Russia is to be secured, Moscow has also to ensure that Ukraine and other European states are equally secured.

Moreover, while national defense and military strength are still important components of national security, common security places a greater emphasis on conflict resolution through diplomacy, negotiation, and adherence to international law. Common security is a win-win approach to relations between countries (resolving issues so that everyone benefits) – rather than a win-lose approach (one country dominant over another) or a lose-lose approach (such as war).

There is sometimes confusion between common security and collective self-defense including a mis-use of these terms. Collective self-defense involves a group of states cooperating to ensure security of all members of that group. NATO is an example of a collective self-defense organization with a focus primarily on military defense. The European Union is a collective security organization which focuses primarily on economic, environmental and human security within the European Union.

Collective security organizations can contribute to common security in their relations with those outside the group, and are encouraged to do so. However, they are primarily concerned with the members of their group, which often places them in competitive and adversarial relations with those outside the group. Therefore, the adoption of a 'common security' model requires the use of existing common security-based organizations where all sides in a conflict are members. In the case of the proxy war in Ukraine, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which has been based on the ideas of 'indivisibility of security', common security, and cooperative security, may be revamped to effectively address the insecurities facing all states which are part

of the European security complex. In a different case, a new common-security-driven and based organization needs to be established in Europe to address those security needs.

The 'Great Power Management' Model

As any anarchic international system, the European regional sub-system lacks a safety net. The fact that there is no official authority above individual states, presents states in a condition where security hinges on what they can provide for themselves. A state, therefore, must be able to defend its interests and support its own actions, especially if its activities contradict norms or the behaviors and interests of other states. In order to support itself, a state requires power. Again, due to the lack of any "safety net" to promote equitable distribution of power, not every state has an equal amount of power. Therefore, not every state has an equal capacity to support its actions and defend its interests. The states with a noticeably greater amount of power are commonly referred to as "great powers."

Hedley Bull (1977, pp. 194-199) defines "great powers" as having three specific qualities. First, they are distinct from empires in that there necessarily exists two or more at a time that are "comparable in status." Second, they must be leaders in terms of military strength; they are superior to all other military powers and can maintain themselves "against all others, even when [all others] are united against" them. One qualification, however, is necessary: the nuclear capabilities of states not qualified as great powers somewhat negate (or at least alter) this condition because there is little a great power can do in order to defend itself from certain nuclear weapons. Third, great powers have a reputation, both within their own borders and externally, of having "certain special rights and duties." In other words, they claim the right to play a determining role in peacekeeping and security matters, but they also accept the duty to maintain peace and security as best they can. At this historical junction, the United States, Russia, and China have the qualities described by Bull and thus are regarded as great powers.

The fact that these states control so much power allows them to determine which activities will be permitted and which activities will not. As Bull states, "because states are grossly unequal in power… the demands of certain states (weak ones) can…be left out of account, and the demands of certain other states (strong ones) recognized to be the only ones relevant" (Ibid, p. 199). Therefore, the great powers work to simplify and focus international relations. However, this certainly produces an element of subjectivity, since their power as a precondition is the only factor that permits them not only to prioritize discussions about the different elements of international relations, but also to determine the outcome of these discussions.

Great powers have certain responsibilities in maintaining an international order (Ibid.). The first responsibility of the great powers is to maintain a global balance of power. This would prevent any state from exercise global dominance. This implies that great powers should be ready to commit their power resources whenever and wherever it is necessary. In this regard, both the United States and Russia, along China have the responsibility to maintain a global balance of power by preventing each other from exercising global dominance.

The second responsibility of great powers is to preserve regional balances of power so that no state manages to become predominant. Given that some regions are extremely important to world stability, such as Europe, this function of the great powers is particular important because if a state manages to dominate a region this would have significant implications for the global balance of power and international stability. Consequently, the United States and Russia, along with France, Britain, and other major European states have the responsibility of maintaining a regional balance of power by preventing another from exercising regional dominance. The means for achieving a regional balance of power include economic and territorial compensations, the production and acquisition of armaments, and the use of alliances. Alliances are one of the most important manifestations of the operations of the balance of power. They facilitate the combination of multiple powers in order to deter a great power from achieving too much domination. Another variety of an alliance is a counter-alliance, which works in a similar fashion. Its purpose is to prevent a preexisting alliance from exercising too much power in the system and succeeding in too many imperialist conquests.

Third, great powers should assume particular responsibilities in the regions in which they are embedded. Historically, great powers have exerted their preponderance within their own regions through creating and defending their "spheres of influence". While a great power will unilaterally exercise its power (whether it is acting solely out of self-interest or whether it also hopes to enhance the welfare of other states) within its own sphere of influence, it operates under conditions agreed upon between itself and other great powers. One of the main causes of the Russian-Ukrainian War can be found in the enlargement of NATO and the denial of the West not to accept Russia as a great power and therefore as possessing the right to have a sphere of influence, interest, or responsibility in its 'Near Abroad'.

But if the system of states is to be preserved both at the regional (i.e., Europe) and global levels, the most essential function of the great powers, such as Russia and the United States is to manage their relations with one another. This function is crucial because the break out of a war between great powers would lead not only to the collapse of the global balance of power but, most importantly, the destruction of the state system as a whole. This is for two reasons: first, the winner of the war might be able to transform the state system into an empire; and second, a prolonged warfare may lead to a state of destruction (especially in the nuclear age) that is not conducive to the effective reconstruction of international order. Great powers are interested to avoid and control crises, which have the potential to escalate into a major war. But if the war begins, great powers have an interest to contain and terminate it as soon as possible before it undermines regional and global stability.

Finally, great powers may contribute to international order by promoting common policies at regional and global levels. This is what is involved in the idea of a 'great power concert'. The adoption of such a model would require that Russia and the United States should have an interest in maintaining both a global and regional balance of power, controlling the spread of nuclear weapons, signing and maintaining international agreements, and defending and implementing international law.
Conclusion

This article has sought to address a fundamental question that has not been left unaddressed, namely if the Russian-Ukrainian War finishes - and especially if its outcome is favorable to Moscow - what form would future political, security, economic, and cultural relations between Russia and the rest of Europe take? What would the European order would look like? The article identified and discussed four models of European order: the 'Iron Curtain', the détente', the 'common security', and the 'great power management' model.

Unfortunately, apart from heightening emotions throughout Europe, the Russian-Ukrainian War has surfaced past debates about cultural, civilizational, ideological, and even racial differences between Russia and Europe. This situation makes the 'Iron Curtain' model the easiest to adopt, at least, in the short run. This doesn't mean that every single state would be happy with such a European order. On the other hand, due to the high level of mistrust existing between Russia and the West, it would be very difficult for the 'common security' model to be adopted although it is this model that has potential to ultimately provide a sustainable order and security in Europe. Consequently, the détente' and the 'great power management' models appear to have the best chance to provide a more cooperative and stable European order, easing the power-security dilemma facing states in the European security complex. If successful, these models would pave the way for the adoption of a new common security regime in Europe.

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Dr. Stivachtis has published numerous journal articles and book chapters, as well as several books. He is currently the editor of the Critical European Studies book series (Routledge) and co-editor of the Athens Journal for Mediterranean Studies. His current service includes External Expert for the Research Executive Agency (REA) of the European Commission; Senior Advisor of the Center for European & Mediterranean Affairs (CEMA) of the Athens Institute for Education & Research (ATINER); Senior Advisor of the Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS); and Advisory Board member of the Center for Intelligence and Security Studies, Bellevue University.

Between War and Peace: The Shifting Realities of Everyday Life in Ukraine

Interview with Professor Greta Uehling
University of Michigan, United States

You have performed extensive research in Ukraine during its conflict with Russia, resulting in three books, *Beyond Memory* (2004), *Everyday War: The Conflict Over Donbas, Ukraine* (2023) and *Decolonizing Ukraine: Indigenous People and Pathways to Freedom* (2025).

How do people in Ukraine maintain a sense of normalcy and cultural continuity despite the war?

Between the occupation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, life for many Ukrainians continued to flow much as it had before, despite the war going on in the Donbas region. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, however, upset that sense of normalcy. The physical destruction of civilian infrastructure continues to profoundly disrupt daily life, providing visceral reminders that no one in Ukraine is entirely safe from Russian attack. Air raid sirens interrupt sleep, and significant parts of the day and night must be spent sheltering underground in communal spaces such as metro stations, basements, and air raid shelters. Reflecting on the phenomenological experience of living in this environment, a woman I interviewed as part of my research in Ukraine stated, "it was the world that collapsed." She was not alone in describing the world-altering effect of military violence: my friend Yuri reflected that this is a place where children learn the precise numerical diameters of ordinance before they learn the alphabet and know their way to the shelter before they learn their way to school.

The destruction of one kind of normalcy, however, also elicits the possibility of new norms and practices. In my 2023 book, *Everyday War: The Conflict Over Donbas, Ukraine*, I explore this generative quality of war in terms of the everyday ethics of care that war elicited. My ethnographic fieldwork, which included over 65 interviews with people affected by the war in Donbas, showed people found their priorities shifting towards attending to others physical and emotional needs as a result of war. Taras provides a good example. He came out of retirement to retrieve fallen soldiers and other abandoned dead at a time when the Ukrainian military was not strong enough to do this task. Taras wanted to bring the families of the deceased peace of mind, even if peace itself was out of reach. Care ethics do not replace justice ethics but are especially salient in Ukraine where the rules of war are so routinely violated, and formal institutions struggle to cope. The paradox of war is that it can foster a sense of ontological, if not physical security. As a displaced man named "Pasha" observed, the existential "what if" fears he carried throughout his life dissipated when he lost his home in a missile strike, was compelled to flee, and found his new neighbors continually stepping in to support his family in displacement.

I further investigated this generative quality in my 2025 book, *Decolonizing Ukraine*. For this book, I conducted over 90 interviews with people affected by the occupation of Crimea. My analysis revealed that while forced displacement was certainly traumatic, it also led to changes that people construed as positive. As "Iuliia" explained it, her experience of fleeing Russian occupation led her into a practice of continually pushing back the previous limits of her imagination. In the field of psychology this is called "post traumatic growth"[1] and has been explored in a wide variety of post-war settings. A poignant example is a woman for whom affording food was a daily challenge who said the key words to describe her experience in displacement were "joy," "wonder," "gratitude," and "happiness." Thus, the loss of home, work, and familiar

routines was tempered by experiences of going back to school, launching a new business, changing careers, and becoming more civically or politically active in government-controlled Ukraine. One of my fieldwork's central findings was this alchemy of adversity - in which those who were internally displaced from Crimea viewed their displacement as a transformative moment that, while certainly unfortunate, also afforded them new ways to be in the world.

What are the greatest impacts to everyday citizens because of the war? What effects do these have on an individual and at a social level?

One of the greatest impacts resulting from the war is a fresh articulation of what it means to be Ukrainian. This was especially striking with regard to greater acceptance of the Indigenous Crimean Tatars. Ukrainians had previously formed their opinions about Crimean Tatars from history books that drew on antiquated and Orientalized portrayals of this Muslim and Turkic speaking group and presented them as backward, uncivilized, and violent. Moreover, until relatively recently, the prevailing historiography deliberately promoted the view that Crimean Tatars and other Ukrainians were mortal enemies through the Middle Ages. As a result of Russian occupation and invasion, however, more Ukrainians became more aware of their regional history. Historians rediscovered forms of collaboration of Crimean Tatars and Cossacks, complicating the previously accepted narrative.

A closely related shift was a fuller appreciation of how ethnic Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars were victimized by Soviet authorities in similar ways. During my research in Ukraine, it became commonplace for the two traumas, namely the state-organized famines across Ukraine in the 1930s and the wholesale deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944, to be publicly acknowledged together at political speeches and cultural events. A tangible example is Taras Shevchenko National University, where the Ukrainian students and faculty began marking significant events in the Crimean Tatar calendar.

Population displacement further catalyzed the recalibration of Ukrainian national identity, as I detail in *Decolonizing Ukraine*. Crimean Tatars

"One of the most overlooked – and understudied - aspects of living through war is the effect it has on personal relationships."

and other Ukrainians told me of rediscovering they had common cultural traditions. For example, Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian musicians told me that they discovered melodies they previously believed were exclusive to their culture could be discerned in the other's music. Artists described finding similar plant motifs in the other's aesthetic style across embroidery, jewelry, and the decorative arts. Ethnographers told me while most Ukrainians are Christian and Crimean Tatars are Muslim, they developed similar customs in their families around major life events like births and marriages. These realizations lead to social cohesion that, in turn, contributes to resilience.

What are some of the most overlooked aspects of living through war, if any, that are often overlooked or not explored enough?

One of the most overlooked – and understudied - aspects of living through war is the effect it has on personal relationships. We know so much more about micro-analytic level of individual psychological trauma and the macropolitical dimensions of war and peace. This represents a significant knowledge gap because as the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s demonstrated, interpersonal ruins are more difficult to repair than infrastructural ones.[ii]

My research showed that although Ukrainian national identity has become more capacious and accepting in government-controlled parts of Ukraine, the same cannot be said of the Russian-occupied territories. In fact, the majority (67%) of the 155 people (including both the Donbas interviews and the Crimea interviews) lamented the destruction of longstanding friendships and the disintegration of family bonds as a result of Russian occupation. As one woman put it, people became "like bombs" because a single word could make someone, emotionally speaking, "explode." For her, this meant the end of her engagement to be married. We can reasonably say the Russian invasion of Ukraine – a military,

humanitarian, and geopolitical crisis - has therefore been accompanied by a relational crisis.

Attending to the effects of war on interpersonal relationships could pay large dividends for regional stability because this form of quotidian war profoundly constrains the ability to even imagine the war's end. When people observe their Russian friends and relatives, people they would also describe as "rational" and "educated," accepting the prevailing Russian narratives, they often conclude that there are essential qualities involved, without respect for the effects of the media.

Working with personal relationships using already established frameworks like the everyday peace indicators[iii] and the multitrack diplomacy system would be very constructive because personal relationships are central to how people construct their individual identities, and because they connect the micro and macro. As such, working with relationships stands to render peace processes more grounded in everyday realities and make peace more sustainable. Millions of lives are affected: war transgresses the boundaries between the personal and political and is continuing recalibrate relationships to this day.[iv]

How do you view truth commissions, war crime trials, or other transitional methods to helping societies recover from the trauma of war?

As a way to respond to Russian aggression, mechanisms of transitional justice will play an indispensable part of forging a just and sustainable peace in Ukraine. The victims and survivors of Russia's war of aggression have a right to know the truth, to seek justice, to receive reparations, and to be protected from further violations. Surveying the transitional justice landscape in Ukraine reveals that many initiatives are already underway. They include:

- International Criminal Court (ICC) issuing warrants for Vladimir Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova. The ICC also opened a field office in Kyiv to pursue accountability.

- The European Union established an International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crimea of Aggression against Ukraine to fill any gaps left by the ICC.

- International Mass Claims Commission (IMCC).

- The UN Human Rights Council established an Independent International Commission of Inquiry.

- The Council of Europe has established the Register of Damage for Ukraine (RD4U).

- The Reckoning Project, which uses testimonies to secure justice.

The goals of transitional justice are complex however, and may at times even be contradictory. Reparations without truth seeking, for example, could be construed as renumerating silence. The success of transitional justice in Ukraine will in large part depend on vertical (international, national, and local) and horizontal (across organizations, institutions, and Ukrainian society) cooperation and coherence.[v]

The question of what timeframe transitional justice initiatives should capture is a case in point. The International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ/IMCC) chose to include only the events following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Similarly, the Register of Damages for Ukraine (RD4U) under the auspices of the Council of Europe collects evidence of damage, loss, and injury only since 2022.[vi] This reflects international interests more than local ones and stands to create two classes of survivors: those affected by Russian aggression between 2014 and 2022, and those after 2022. Decisions like this one will have far reaching consequences, affecting, among other things, Ukrainian refugees' calculus about whether to return to their country at the end of the war.

An aspect of coherence that is especially pressing considering the recent tendency for some international organizations and Western leaders to treat their Ukrainian counterparts in a paternalistic way is coherence with *Ukrainian* national priorities. Just as Ukraine seeks to decolonize itself of Russian influence, it is equally important for the approach to transitional justice in Ukraine to be a decolonial one. After all, Ukraine is a country with its own established institutions of justice and should not be viewed as a "blank slate" for outsiders to impose their exogenous transitional

justice frameworks. Scholars have criticized the field of transitional justice for relying too heavily on an overly theoretical and legalistic paradigm that is misaligned with the psychological realities of mass violence where it occurs,[vii] and for spawning a professional class that is primarily concerned with its own survival.[viii] Well-intentioned actors and institutions can avoid some of the mistakes of the past by refraining from duplicating existing structures and plans.

Ukrainian authorities have developed their own plans for transitional justice. In a multipoint plan published by Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council in April 2023, criminal prosecution for collaboration and treason are at the top of the page.[ix] Property that changed hands in occupied territory unlawfully will be returned to its rightful owners, and those who spread disinformation will be terminated from their jobs and prevented from working in Crimea again. This plan has taken shape in the context of dramatic changes in the way that the Ukrainian government understands its Indigenous people. The Mission of the President of Ukraine in Crimea has developed a strategy for what they call cognitive deoccupation which envisions a transition in the values and worldview of people residing in formerly Russian dominated areas. The transformation will be pursued through a variety of means, including the use of state and social media, reforming the education system at all levels, and fully supporting Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar languages.

These plans have been developed in collaboration with the Crimean Tatars, who have played an important role in ensuring that Indigenous rights are respected. Key to a decolonial approach to transitional justice is including the experiences and needs of formerly colonized Indigenous peoples, such as the Crimean Tatars who have suffered disproportionately. When peace has been achieved, the structural inequalities that limited Crimean Tatars' ability to exercise their human rights over not just the last decade but much longer can finally be addressed. Transitional justice can benefit from recognizing the colonial components shaping modern wars, and include this awareness in dealing with the legacy massive human rights abuses.[x] Ultimately, the only Truth Commissions or commissions of inquiry that should operate in Ukraine are those that meaningfully engage with Ukrainian priorities and offer Ukrainians genuine oversight.

The war in Ukraine has reshaped how Ukrainians understand themselves and their place in the world. The relational infrastructure that Ukrainians have built over the past decade will be key to creating prosperity and eventually achieving peace. To ensure these goals are realized, Ukraine must be given genuine ownership of the peace process and the utilization of transitional justice mechanisms that align with its national priorities.

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Professor Uehling holds a PhD in cultural anthropology from the University of Michigan. In 2004, she completed a post-doctoral fellowship with the Solomon Asch Center for the Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict at the University of Pennsylvania. She is the author of *Beyond Memory: The Deportation and Repatriation of the Crimean Tatars*, *Everyday War*: *The Conflict over Donbas, Ukraine*, and *Decolonizing Ukraine: Indigenous People and Pathways to Freedom*. She is also the author of numerous scholarly articles and book chapters.

A Rapidly Changing Environment for Energy

Professor Warren Mabee
Queens University, Canada

The world continues to face the challenges of climate change. From wildfires that have decimated communities (including Los Angeles), to drought stretching across large ranges of Europe and North America, to rapidly rising ocean temperatures linked to stronger hurricane events, economies around the world are absorbing increasing costs from climate-related disruptions, with global costs exceeding $200B per year according to the International Chamber of Commerce. Compounding these trends are the disruptive impacts of recently introduced U.S. tariffs on the global economy. The global energy sector is particularly challenged in the face of these disruptions.

Energy and climate

Depending on how definitions are applied, the energy sector can be linked to up to 75% of global CO2 emissions, primarily related to the production and use of petroleum-based products, natural gas, and coal.

Addressing energy-related emissions is a major component of climate policy in Europe and North America; depending on the jurisdiction, these policies have either tried to support renewable energy development, regulate or disincentivize the use of fossil energy, or both. In North America, the outlook for some of these policies are increasingly uncertain. Canada has recently ended a national carbon tax which served to disincentivize fossil fuel use, and a Federal election called for April 2025 will see a new government form. In the U.S., President Trump's January 2025 Executive Order on 'Unleashing American Energy' removes some of the supports that his predecessor had provided to support renewable energy uptake through the Inflation Reduction Act. The policy situation in Europe is more stable thanks to the centralized climate policies devised through the European Union; however, there are rising calls to reduce the emissions reduction target for 2040, currently set at 90% below 1990 levels.

One might expect that weakening of climate regulations might lead to dramatic growth in fossil energy industries. However, this is far from certain. Data from the IEA's World Energy Balances suggests that a shift in demand for energy products is underway. The demand for electricity exceeded 20% of total global energy demand in 2022, and could reach as high as 30% by 2030. At the same time, demand for refined petroleum products (e.g., gasoline, diesel fuels) has stalled, moving below 40% of total energy demand from as high as 45% in 2000. In the production of electricity, coal remains the largest provider of power worldwide, but it's share continues to slip in favor of natural gas, wind, and solar PV.

Energy and global markets

Major banks have increasingly suggested that a global recession could start before the end of the year if the U.S. tariffs continue to be imposed. The introduction of these tariffs threatens global supply chains that have already suffered extreme disruption through the years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact that the tariffs are being imposed, paused, and restructured at a breakneck pace has created chaos in the global trade order.

Of all components of the energy sector, the oil industry is feeling the impact of U.S. tariffs the most. The rapid-fire introduction and then suspension of U.S. tariffs, at the time of writing, has had a dramatic impact on oil prices worldwide. Introduction of tariffs in early April reduced

both Brent and WTI indices to four-year lows; suspension of tariffs (as of April 9) has led to some recovery in these prices. The response of oil prices to tariffs is notable for a couple of reasons. First, price declines seen at the imposition of the tariffs occurred despite the fact that oil and gas are (for the most part) excluded from these measures. This exemption has been provided because the U.S. energy market is tightly integrated with global partners; the U.S. has refinery capacity to handle more than they produce, and takes in large volumes of oil from other nations. Second, the decline in oil prices was not immediately reversed when tariffs were suspended, although some price gains were observed. This demonstrates the fact that energy prices are driven by industrial and consumer demand, and tariffs are negatively impacting localized demand for different goods in many countries. A weakening in oil pricing could lead to a glut of supply, which will erode the industry's profitability moving through 2025.

One component of the energy sector that will also suffer under the U.S. tariff scheme is likely to be the mining of critical elements, including rare earths, essential for the production of turbines, engines, solar panels, and batteries required for the green energy transition. Developing new pathways for critical elements mining and processing is a key priority for most nations. China is the largest producer of these products, and has the largest rare earths reserves in the world; the nation had previously banned the export of technology the nation has developed to extract these materials. Europe has adopted policies which call for domestic mining (10%) and processing (40%) of critical elements by 2030, but critics have highlighted the challenges in doing so in the face of Chinese technology bans. In response to tariffs, China has placed restrictions on rare earths exports to the USA, which threatens the production of green energy products in the U.S. and further disrupts the global supply chain, creating additional challenges for growth in the green energy industry.

Looking into 2025

The stage is thus set for a reboot in the global energy market. On the one hand, confusion over climate policy and economic chaos caused by tariffs are not likely to quell rising demand for electricity. According to the IEA's latest World Energy Outlook, the growth in demand for electric vehicles, heat pumps, quantum computing, and artificial intelligence has had a marked impact on electricity needs worldwide. One of the fastest growing sectors - data centers which support new tools, like artificial intelligence - could see rises in electricity needs by as much as 5-fold by the year 2030, although even then they will remain a small component within total electricity demand. Consumers have invested heavily in new tools; demand for electricity in transportation, heating and cooling, and industry are likely to continue to rise, although the rate of growth might slow in the face of economic uncertainty. With the supply chain for critical elements interrupted, meeting the need for increased electricity generation will be challenged.

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The impacts of tariffs and softening environmental regulation on oil production is the other major component at play. With a global recession looming, the chances for an oil glut builds, which could see substantive lowering in oil prices and ultimately difficult times for energy companies worldwide. In previous recessions, price collapses have often required governments to intervene to maintain production capacity and keep critical energy resources flowing.

These trends will challenge the ability of governments to continue to drive rapid transition in the energy sector, because the growth which supported this transition may be very limited in the short term. This 'pause' in the global energy sector is an ideal time to reflect on the pathways forward.

First, there is a pressing need to ensure continued access to affordable energy, as this is an essential component in the fight against climate change. Cooling in particular represents a 'new' energy load in many regions that is primarily met using electricity. Irrigation or desalinization are energy-intensive operations that are likely to be in ever-increasing demand as the world warms.

Second, nations need to carefully consider the way in which access to critical elements are developed. New renewable energy development, not to mention expansion of artificial intelligence, computing and electronic tools, will heavily depend on new mining activities. The IEA anticipates that these activities will have to be expanded in scope by a factor of 2- to 4-fold to support the energy transition. In the face of trade disruption, the need to ensure that supply chains are not dominated by single players becomes paramount, and nations in Europe and North America should pay careful attention to the need to expand localized access to these resources. As timelines to new mining operations in Europe and North America tend to be long, this requires immediate attention.

Finally, there is a tremendous opportunity to re-engage the oil and gas industries in the discussion about energy futures. There is no doubt that these industries have the expertise and capacity to be a major part of the solution, and they are an essential component in providing the affordable energy required for short-term responses to climate challenges. A drop in oil pricing means that these companies are more likely to come to the table for discussions about energy transitions, which in turn will increase the likelihood of an orderly and successful transition in the longer term.

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Wicked Problem: How to Combat Conspiracy Theories Spread by Political Leaders

Dr. Jieun Shin
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Until recently, the problem of conspiracy theories and disinformation was thought to belong to gullible and delusional social media users with minimal power. Bad actors with ill intentions spread false information online for monetary gain or political power. It is believed that these bad actors reach a small group of like-minded individuals who are susceptible to biases and lack critical thinking. These anonymous, mob-like social media users then fuel unverified rumors and conspiracy theories, slowly sowing the seeds of distrust in democratic institutions.

Lately, however, this formula seems to have changed. Rather than ordinary users, political leaders are becoming the targets of conspiracy theories and serve as mega-amplifiers of fringe ideas. When the leaders repeat false claims without a verification process, the ripple effect is catastrophic.

This is exactly what happened in South Korea. Late at night on December 3, 2024, former South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol shocked the entire country by declaring martial law on television. In this surprise televised address, Yoon argued that his decision was intended to prevent "anti-state" pro-North Korean forces and to investigate their interference with election results. He sent heavily armed soldiers to block entry to the National Assembly.

Fortunately, Parliament, including members of his own party, acted swiftly and overruled the president's martial law in an emergency session just two hours later. On April 4, 2025, after months of political turmoil, Yoon was officially removed from office by the unanimous decision of South Korea's highest court for violating democratic principles.

What was Yoon thinking? Many begged the question, "Why on earth?" As it turns out, Yoon was echoing major talking points of conspiracy theorists on YouTube. The language he used during the televised address, such as "anti-state" forces and election interference by North Korea, were the exact phrases and arguments made by fringe far-right channels that promote groundless allegations.

It is hard to prove how much Yoon's actions were influenced by social media conspiracy theorists. The opposite direction of influence is also possible. Yoon may have used the voice of a marginal conspiratorial group as a tool to escape a political predicament and the low approval ratings he was facing. Either way, a clear overlap exists in the former president's and conspiracy theorists' narratives on social media. These channels had been urging the president to declare martial law for weeks before he actually did. Even after Yoon's impeachment, these far-right YouTube channels continue to spread disinformation about the stolen election to this day.

This entire event shows that political leaders in a country can become super carriers of disinformation. South Korea's case is not an isolated incident. This pattern has been observed across the globe. A growing number of academic papers investigate the symbiotic relationships

When a conspiracy theory is promoted by political leaders, it gains dangerous legitimacy. Curbing the spread of misinformation on social media is a 'wicked problem.'

between conspiracy theorists and political leaders, such as in the United States, Brazil, Venezuela, and Hungary (Pirro & Taggart, 2023; Ren et al., 2022; Ricard & Medeiros, 2020).

When a conspiracy theory is promoted by political leaders, it gains dangerous legitimacy. Curbing the spread of misinformation on social media is a 'wicked problem.' It is a difficult task due to its complex nature and its intertwined dependency on evolving external factors. When a political leader is the one spreading a conspiracy theory, rebutting and fighting the spread of misinformation becomes extremely challenging. Countering the false claim can be seen as a political act and may even backfire.

This is why independent journalism and fact-checking efforts are ever more important than ever. Despite criticism of mainstream media and journalistic fact-checking, they remain vital instruments for holding tyranny in check, especially when disinformation and conspiracy theories are weaponized for political gain. Rigorous and fearless independent news reporting can produce the necessary friction against the conspiracy theories promoted by political leaders.

Collaboration with platform companies has proven to be one of the most effective systems. Removing false claims and demoting conspiracy theories through algorithms is a powerful intervention. However, given the fragmented social media landscape and the difficulty of coordinating each private tech company, taking this route is extremely challenging. As seen in the case of X (formerly known as Twitter), an ownership change can overturn previously established norms and policies regarding content moderation.

Wicked problems are, by definition, difficult to solve. However, we can strive to mitigate and minimize the harm. It requires a multi-stakeholder, interdisciplinary, and iterative approach. Establishing a common goal and fostering joint efforts among governments, platforms, and civil society is necessary. Independent and fact-based journalism should serve as both a foundational building block and an anchor point in the mitigation process.

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She has published in academic journals such as the Journal of Communication, Digital Journalism, New Media & Society, Mass Communication and Society, Social Media + Society, Computers and Human Behavior, and Journal of Health Communication. Jieun has co-authored two books examining how technology has transformed society. She received Emerging Scholar awards from AEJMC in 2022 and won the Nafziger-White-Walwen Dissertation Award in 2017. Prior to joining UF, Jieun was an NIH-funded postdoctoral research fellow at the Center for Applied Network Analysis in the Department of USC Preventive Medicine. She received her Ph.D. from the Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, University of Southern California.

Previously, Jieun worked as a journalist for six years at the Chosun Daily, South Korea's largest newspaper. Her work has won numerous prizes for journalistic excellence, including the "Citibank Journalism Award." She was also named by Asia Society as one of 21 Young Leaders in 2012.

A “Reset” in 2025: AI Governance for a Just and Sustainable Future

Joel N. Christoph
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Introduction

The year 2024 was marked by momentous global events that underscored our collective vulnerabilities and interdependence: contested national elections in over seventy countries; continuing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East; debates over food prices and humanitarian aid; climate negotiations at COP29; and the growing public debate around artificial intelligence (AI). By year’s end, AI had advanced at breakneck speed, with generative models and new automation capabilities transforming entire industries, from supply chains to healthcare. This unprecedented pace of technological change both energized hopes for progress and raised concerns over potential job displacement, privacy breaches, and environmental impacts. As the international community looks to 2025 as a chance to “reset,” it is clear that coherent AI governance is a linchpin to ensuring a more sustainable and just future.

AI’s Clash With Old Regulatory Models

AI innovations in 2024 seemed to outstrip existing regulatory frameworks. Algorithmic bias lawsuits rose steeply, highlighting the negative impacts of unregulated, data-hungry AI systems on marginalized communities. Meanwhile, climate experts argued that the computational demands of large-scale AI training contributed to energy consumption and, hence, greenhouse gas emissions. Although some frontier AI labs have begun adopting energy-efficient hardware, the overall carbon footprint of advanced machine learning remains under-scrutinized. We are only beginning to glimpse the intersection of digital and environmental governance. Traditional regulators lack the resources and expertise to keep pace. The result is a global patchwork of inadequate oversight in which Big Tech can wield outsize influence.

.A “reset” means building trust in AI by harnessing it to promote the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals while instituting safeguards for fairness and accountability.

Challenges and Opportunities for 2025

While these issues in 2024 underscored the urgent need for updated policies, 2025 offers an opening to implement comprehensive, forward-looking AI governance. Key to the conversation is bridging AI’s dual role as both an enabler and a potential threat to sustainable development. AI optimizes energy usage in power grids, directs climate adaptation strategies via advanced simulations, and improves climate-smart agriculture by providing real-time, hyper-local weather data. Yet, left unchecked, AI can exacerbate social inequities, accelerate resource extraction, and intensify global carbon footprints.

A “reset” means building trust in AI by harnessing it to promote the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals while instituting safeguards for fairness and accountability. Achieving these aspirations will require that governments, the private sector, civil society, and academia collaborate in new multilevel governance arrangements. The European Union’s experience with its proposed AI Act could prove instructive, though the

final shape and acceptance remain uncertain. Meanwhile, the global competition in AI capabilities, led by the United States and China, must not sideline climate change concerns. Rather, climate policy can align with AI policy. For instance, targeted carbon pricing for large-scale AI computing centers can reduce emissions, and mandated environmental impact disclosures for AI hardware supply chains can foster transparency. The year 2025 can see innovative frameworks that set a precedent for universal, fair standards.

Case for an International AI Body

In 2025, calls are intensifying for an international body—a specialized AI governance institution under the aegis of the United Nations or a new multi-stakeholder coalition. Such a body could offer guidelines, best practices, and an enforcement mechanism to ensure AI development does not infringe upon basic human rights or degrade environmental conditions. Its responsibilities might span from publishing AI ethics recommendations to orchestrating joint research on energy-efficient AI hardware. With representation from all world regions, it could also address existing concerns around the "digital divide," ensuring that AI's benefits are not hoarded by a few advanced economies.

It is crucial that any new institution adopt an inclusive approach: indigenous knowledge systems and local communities can highlight the ground-level realities of climate vulnerability. Affirming the principle that climate action and AI progress are not zero-sum but mutually reinforcing can unify diverse stakeholders. Indeed, in the same manner that we have ongoing negotiations for shared cybersecurity norms, 2025 should see parallel negotiations for AI guidelines that avert "model monopolies" and require robust environmental stewardship.

Political Obstacles and the Way Forward.

Political friction is inevitable. Some states might resist ceding sovereignty or hamper strong enforcement mechanisms, while influential tech corporations may be wary of stringent regulations that could reduce profit margins or slow product rollouts. However, inaction is riskier. The climate costs of unregulated AI could be immense, both in direct emissions from large-scale computing and in potential negative societal outcomes (e.g., fueling misinformation that impedes effective climate policy). Indeed, 2024's supercharged disinformation environment about climate science, driven partly by deepfake videos, stands as a cautionary tale.

An array of strategies can help navigate the politics: forging alliances of mid-sized countries to champion AI standards that serve global public goods; inviting philanthropic and civil society alliances to the table; requiring that all public AI procurement meets specific accountability and sustainability criteria; and awarding tax incentives for the development of "green AI." The world learned from the earlier era of unbridled technology adoption (from social media to fracking) that proactive regulation is preferable to crisis-driven, belated measures. The year 2025 thus beckons for leadership that merges climate stewardship with digital innovation policy.

Implementation Roadmap

A pragmatic approach involves building from local pilot projects to global solutions. Municipalities can enforce carbon-friendly data center footprints by awarding concessions only if certain emission standards are met. Government agencies can champion "AI for Good" competitions that reward solutions to pressing local climate challenges. National-level policies can require corporations to track AI's resource usage and offset or reduce it. At the global scale, the proposed international AI body can coordinate knowledge transfer on advanced energy-saving chips and direct more climate-finance flows toward AI-driven adaptation technologies in climate-vulnerable developing regions.

More broadly, countries must bolster digital literacy among regulators, policymakers, and the public. Without a baseline understanding of AI's capabilities and limitations, societies risk being swayed by alarmism or complacency. A well-informed public can better support measured, constructive policy frameworks that harness AI to resolve climate threats. Indeed, many youth movements that shaped climate politics in the late 2010s could pivot in 2025 toward ensuring that AI becomes part of the climate solution rather than a fresh source of inequality.

Conclusion

The upcoming year is a make-or-break moment for AI and climate action. In 2024, the world confronted an AI revolution that outpaced regulation and reconfigured multiple sectors, from agriculture to finance. Meanwhile, global warming marched onward, exacerbating extreme weather, fueling mass displacement, and threatening to deepen inequality. Looking to 2025, a "reset" demands forging new AI governance frameworks that uphold transparency, fairness, and environmental sustainability. These frameworks will require effective enforcement and broad-based collaboration across national lines, private tech labs, civil society, and citizens worldwide. The climate crisis has long demanded bold policies; so too does AI's breakneck trajectory. By tackling both together, 2025 can be the launchpad for a just, sustainable future—where humanity leverages AI's promise, while safeguarding the planet we call home.

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Making Climate Work: Merging National Interest, Market Incentives, and Ecological Justice

Christopher Burke
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The global climate crisis requires urgent, coordinated action; yet international responses often appear fragmented due to ideological and theoretical differences. While realist theory, neoliberalism, and green theory are widely perceived as conflicting approaches to climate governance, under the right conditions these perspectives can align to drive meaningful solutions.

Achieving such convergence is a substantial challenge in an increasingly multipolar world where geopolitical rivalries, economic protectionism, and the retreat of major powers from multilateral commitments complicate collective action. The Trump administration's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2017 and subsequent accelerated disengagement from a broad range of international commitments underscore the fragility of international cooperation and the challenges maintaining momentum toward the realization of sustainability goals.

Each of these theoretical perspectives offer distinct advantages that, if strategically integrated, generate powerful synergies for effective climate governance. Renowned realist Kenneth Waltz explained how rational states pursue survival and security through power balancing and relative gains in an anarchic international system making cooperation difficult due to fears of cheating and unequal benefits. Offensive realists such as John Mearsheimer reinforce this view emphasizing that states are inherently driven to maximize power.

The widely acclaimed neoliberal theorist Robert Keohane argued in his seminal work *After Hegemony* (1984) that cooperation among states—including participation in environmental agreements—is possible not due to altruism, but because it aligns with rational self-interest. When climate action is framed as a strategic necessity for economic competitiveness, national security, or geopolitical influence, states are more likely to cooperate. Lisa Martin and Duncan Snidal contributed to neoliberal institutionalist arguments associated with the role of institutions in reducing transaction costs, promoting transparency, and facilitating dispute resolution.

Neoliberalism emphasizes market-based solutions and institutional cooperation. By leveraging international institutions, financial incentives, and corporate responsibility, climate governance can be made more efficient and scalable. Green theory, meanwhile, calls for sustainability, ecological justice, and a transformation of political authority. Prominent green theorist Robyn Eckersley at the University of Melbourne critiques realism arguing for a redefinition of sovereignty toward environmental responsibility. Jennifer Clapp and Peter Dauvergne expanded green theory by exploring the political economy of sustainability, equity, and resistance to corporate-driven environmental degradation.

Robert Falkner, professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science, argues that aspects of green theory including ecological responsibility and sustainability can be integrated into neoliberal policy frameworks to enable the simultaneous pursuit of economic growth and environmental protection. The challenge lies in creating the conditions under which these theoretical approaches align rather than conflict. Governments must perceive climate change as a core strategic threat rather than a peripheral issue. This includes national security risks such as resource conflicts and climate-induced migration; economic incentives such as leadership in renewable energy; and diplomatic leverage derived from international reputation.

These shifts require strong scientific communication, clear economic incentives, and sustained public pressure to make climate action politically viable. In today's multipolar world with the United States, China, and European Union pursuing divergent climate strategies; securing broad-based commitment faces profound challenges. Economic competition, trade disputes, and nationalist policies continue to undermine long-term cooperation.

Neoliberal market mechanisms such as carbon pricing, emissions trading, and green finance require robust regulatory frameworks to ensure accountability and minimize greenwashing. Governments must implement clear policies that align business interests with sustainability goals through subsidies for clean energy, tax incentives for green technologies, and penalties for excessive emissions. Rather than viewing economic growth and environmental protection as opposing forces, policies should strengthen the integration of sustainability into economic planning.

Investment in renewable energy, circular economies, and sustainable agriculture can create jobs while reducing emissions making climate action both politically and economically attractive. These measures require long-term financial commitments. With the U.S. reducing its contributions to global climate initiatives under the current administration, other nations will be required to fill the gap.

Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) frameworks encourage corporations to embed sustainability into business models and to be accountable for environmental impacts, labor practices, and governance standards. The alignment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with ESG offers a critical mechanism to bridge gaps between neoliberalism and green theory. However, ESG is not without its detractors. The concept is also interpreted differently across academia and industry reflecting diverse aspirations and contradictions. These discrepancies affect how ESG is implemented, measured, and debated.

ESG reflects a notable departure from the Washington Consensus, predominant through the 1990s, that emphasized market liberalization, privatization, and fiscal austerity with limited attention to equity or environmental sustainability. In contrast, ESG and the SDGs aim to integrate economic performance with ecological responsibility and social justice offering a more inclusive and accountable framework for global governance.

Adopted by the United Nations in 2015, the SDGs offer a structured pathway to align financial incentives with climate action. Companies adopting ESG-aligned SDG targets increasingly attract investment, as sustainability metrics become a priority for global capital markets. A 2022 Morningstar report indicated that global sustainable fund assets surpassed US$2.8 trillion, representing approximately 7 percent of all assets under management. Nonetheless, ESG investing remains fraught with challenges. Greenwashing, inconsistent reporting standards, and corporate resistance hinder effectiveness. Without stronger enforcement and globally harmonized ESG standards, the risk of misleading sustainability claims will persist.

Effective global institutions are crucial for climate governance. Neoliberal institutionalism demonstrates that cooperation is achievable when institutions provide transparency, incentives, and dispute resolution. Expanding the role of international agreements such as the Paris Agreement, the UN Green Climate Fund, and WTO trade policies on sustainability can help ensure a fair and enforceable governance system. Given the diverging climate strategies of major powers, from U.S. deregulation to China's state-driven interventions, the fragmentation of global leadership remains a major hurdle.

Green theory's emphasis on justice and equity must be incorporated into policy to ensure climate measures do not disproportionately burden developing nations and marginalized populations. Mechanisms such as the Loss and Damage Fund and targeted investments in climate resilience can help reconcile ecological justice with realist and neoliberal frameworks.

To foster meaningful convergence between realist, neoliberal, and green theory; governments, business, and civil society must act deliberately and in concert.

To foster meaningful convergence between realist, neoliberal, and green theory; governments, business, and civil society must act deliberately and in concert. Climate action should be framed as a strategic national priority, integrated into economic policy, and aligned with interests in energy security, innovation, and global influence. Governments need to explore ways to strengthen multilateral institutions and ensure that environmental regulations are grounded in credible norms, enforceable rules and transparent processes.

Businesses must move beyond symbolic ESG gestures and commit to measurable investments in clean technology, sustainable innovation, and transparent emissions reduction. International institutions should reinforce enforcement mechanisms for climate agreements, expand climate finance, and integrate environmental clauses into global trade frameworks.

Civil society and academia have a critical role in advocating for policy coherence, ensuring that sustainability goals are framed in ways that align with national interests and market incentives. The resurgence of nationalism and short-term economic thinking continues to obstruct ambitious climate action, making sustained public engagement all the more vital.

Rather than treating realist, neoliberal, and green theory as incompatible, we must recognize their potential to be strategically aligned. Realism's emphasis on national interest, neoliberalism's focus on institutional efficiency and market incentives, and green theory's commitment to ecological justice can reinforce one another when supported by strong governance frameworks.

When aligned with the SDGs, ESG frameworks provide a pragmatic foundation for the development of global norms, rules, and procedures that can sustain this convergence. If implemented effectively, they can bridge competing interests and enable a more stable, just, and sustainable climate regime.

In an increasingly multipolar world marked by geopolitical instability, regulatory fragmentation, and corporate resistance, aligning diverse theoretical approaches is a complex but necessary task. Progress will depend less on sweeping declarations and more on practical steps: strengthening enforcement mechanisms, improving regulatory consistency, and designing climate policies that balance national interests with ecological integrity.

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Integrating Climate Financing into Public Finance Management: Opportunities and Challenges

Interview with Ramil Abbsabov
George Mason University, United States

Why is climate financing important within the context of public finance management systems?

Mr. Ramil Abbasov: Climate financing is becoming indispensable for modern public finance management systems for several reasons. Traditionally, public finance has focused on macroeconomic stability, resource allocation, and service delivery. However, the accelerating pace of climate change now requires governments to reassess these priorities through a climate lens. Public finance systems must not only manage traditional fiscal risks but also adapt to climate-related risks—both physical (e.g., floods, droughts) and transition-related (e.g., carbon pricing, energy market shifts).

Incorporating climate finance into public finance management (PFM) serves three main goals. First, it enhances risk management by helping governments address the growing fiscal threats posed by climate-related events. These events can destroy infrastructure, disrupt economic activity, and place additional pressure on public budgets. By integrating climate considerations into financial planning—through tools such as climate budget tagging and disaster risk finance strategies—governments can proactively identify, mitigate, and plan for these risks. Second, it supports resource mobilization and efficiency. While international sources like the Green Climate Fund and bilateral aid play a role, domestic public finance is the foundation of climate action. Embedding climate finance principles within PFM enables governments to align budgets with climate goals, minimize overlaps, and allocate resources more strategically. Third, it promotes policy coherence and governance by aligning national budgeting systems with international climate commitments, such as those under the Paris Agreement. This integration ensures that fiscal policies, planning processes, procurement practices, and public investment decisions all work in unison to advance climate resilience and low-carbon development.

Ultimately, the public sector controls substantial financial flows. Without aligning these flows with climate objectives, the impact of global climate finance will remain fragmented and suboptimal.

What are some key tools and practices governments can adopt to integrate climate financing into their budgeting processes?

There is a growing toolkit for integrating climate considerations into the budget cycle.

Several effective practices can help governments integrate climate finance into their budgeting processes. One widely used tool is Climate Budget Tagging (CBT), which allows for the identification and tracking of climate-relevant expenditures across ministries and agencies. By tagging spending as mitigation - or adaptation-related, CBT offers greater transparency, enabling a clearer understanding of national climate investments and improving access to external climate finance. Another key instrument is the Green Budget Statement (GBS)—a document annexed to the national budget that outlines how fiscal allocations support climate objectives. GBS enhances accountability and allows stakeholders, including legislators, and civil society to assess the coherence of public spending with climate commitments.

Public Investment Management Frameworks (PIMFs) also play a vital role by ensuring that climate risks and opportunities are considered

throughout the project lifecycle—from selection and appraisal to implementation. Instruments like cost-benefit analysis, shadow carbon pricing, and climate risk assessments are crucial to making climate-informed investment decisions. Meanwhile, Medium-Term Expenditure Frameworks (MTEFs) help institutionalize climate financing over a multi-year horizon, promoting policy consistency, predictability, and strategic alignment with long-term climate goals.

Fiscal Risk Assessments are another critical tool. By incorporating climate-related risks into fiscal frameworks, governments can gauge their vulnerability to disasters such as floods or hurricanes and plan appropriate financial buffers using scenario analyses. Lastly, Performance-Based Budgeting (PBB) links budget allocations to measurable outcomes. In the context of climate finance, PBB ensures that public expenditures lead to tangible results—such as emissions reductions or increased resilience—thereby strengthening transparency, efficiency, and accountability in climate-related public spending. These tools are mutually reinforcing. The most successful reformers take a holistic approach, embedding climate considerations throughout the budget cycle rather than treating them as an add-on.

What are the challenges countries face when trying to integrate climate finance into PFM systems, particularly in developing countries?

This is an important question because, despite growing interest and policy commitments, implementation remains challenging—especially in low- and middle-income countries.

Integrating climate finance into public finance management systems presents a range of challenges, particularly in developing countries. One major issue is institutional fragmentation. Climate change is inherently cross-sectoral, yet most ministries and agencies function in silos. Weak coordination between finance, environment, energy, and planning ministries often results in inconsistent policies, overlapping responsibilities, and inefficient resource allocation. Another significant barrier is limited technical capacity. Climate finance requires a blend of technical, economic, and environmental expertise, but many budget officers lack the necessary tools and training to assess climate risks or quantify adaptation costs. At the same time, environmental specialists may not fully grasp public finance systems, making cross-sector collaboration difficult and highlighting the urgent need to bridge this skills gap.

Data constraints also hinder effective climate budgeting. Reliable, disaggregated data on climate impacts and public expenditures is often missing, making it challenging to conduct risk assessments, determine investment priorities, or monitor progress. Developing strong Monitoring, Reporting, and Verification (MRV) systems requires substantial investment in data infrastructure. Compounding these issues is budget rigidity and political economy. Many countries face inflexible budget structures that limit the reallocation of funds. Additionally, entrenched fossil fuel subsidies and the long-term nature of climate benefits often conflict with short-term political interests, slowing down reform. Another critical challenge is accessing international climate finance. Despite the availability of funds from mechanisms such as the Green Climate Fund, many countries struggle to meet donor requirements due to weak financial systems, limited project pipelines, and bureaucratic delays. Finally, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of climate spending is especially complex. Climate impacts are long-term and uncertain, making it difficult to attribute outcomes to specific expenditures. Moreover, many countries lack performance indicators specifically tailored to climate goals, further complicating efforts to assess effectiveness and improve accountability.

Despite these challenges, countries like Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal, and Rwanda have made significant strides. They demonstrate that, with political commitment, donor coordination, and capacity building, meaningful reform is possible.

How does climate finance contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and what role can public budgets play in this alignment?

Climate finance and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are deeply interconnected. SDG 13 explicitly calls for urgent action on

With mounting climate pressures, economic recovery needs, and international financing opportunities, integrating climate into PFM (Public Climate Financing) is not just advisable—it's essential.

climate change, but virtually all SDGs—such as ending poverty (SDG 1), ensuring clean water (SDG 6), and promoting sustainable cities (SDG 11)—depend on climate-resilient and low-carbon development.

Climate finance in public budgets plays a crucial role in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by promoting resilient, inclusive, and forward-looking development. One key contribution is mainstreaming climate in development. When climate finance is embedded in national and sectoral budgets, it ensures that broader development initiatives are climate-resilient and sustainable. For example, allocating resources to flood-resistant infrastructure or drought-resistant agriculture not only addresses climate risks but also supports goals like SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 13 (Climate Action). Another important contribution is addressing inequality. Since climate change disproportionately impacts vulnerable populations, public climate finance directed toward social protection, rural livelihoods, and health infrastructure reduces disparities and supports SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being).

Additionally, empowering local governments through decentralized climate finance allows subnational actors to craft context-specific responses, strengthening institutional capacity and reinforcing SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Climate finance also stimulates green jobs and innovation by promoting investments in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and circular economy models. These efforts contribute to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure). Lastly, enhancing transparency and governance is a natural outcome of climate budgeting reforms, which often introduce participatory planning, performance tracking, and clearer accountability structures. These reforms further support SDG 16 by improving institutional trust and governance outcomes.

Public budgets are the operational arms of government policy. Aligning them with both climate objectives and SDGs allows countries to build resilient, inclusive, and forward-looking development pathways.

Looking ahead, what are your recommendations for policymakers who want to advance climate finance integration in their PFM systems?

This is a pivotal moment for public finance reform. With mounting climate pressures, economic recovery needs, and international financing opportunities, integrating climate into PFM is not just advisable—it's essential.

To effectively integrate climate finance into public finance management systems, several key recommendations should be considered. First and foremost, political commitment at the highest level is essential. Ministries of finance must lead the climate integration agenda, treating it not merely as an environmental issue but as a central pillar of governance and economic planning. When top-level leaders endorse and champion climate-informed budgeting, reforms gain the momentum and legitimacy needed for meaningful change. Next, countries should develop a roadmap for reform, starting with a diagnostic assessment of how climate considerations are currently reflected in their PFM systems. This baseline can inform a phased and prioritized roadmap, focusing on areas such as climate budget tagging, investment appraisal, and fiscal risk analysis. Strengthening inter-ministerial coordination is also crucial. Establishing formal structures like climate finance task forces or interagency committees helps bridge gaps between ministries of finance, environment, planning, and other relevant bodies. Joint training sessions and shared guidance documents can further foster policy alignment and shared ownership. Simultaneously, it is vital to invest in capacity development and data systems. Budget officers, analysts, and sector planners need to be trained in climate finance tools, while investments in data infrastructure—such as GIS platforms and disaster risk databases—can significantly improve evidence-based decision-making.

Policymakers should also leverage international support strategically, ensuring that donor assistance aligns with national reform priorities

rather than promoting fragmented, project-based interventions. Another important step is to institutionalize monitoring and learning. Establishing systems that track climate expenditures and evaluate their outcomes enables adaptive management and continuous improvement, creating a cycle of evidence-informed policymaking. Finally, engaging citizens and parliament enhances transparency and public trust. Involving stakeholders in climate budgeting—especially at the local level—and ensuring that relevant information is publicly accessible helps build inclusive support for reforms and strengthens democratic accountability. The climate finance-PFM nexus is still evolving, but the momentum is growing. Countries that act early and decisively will not only manage risks better but also unlock new growth opportunities in a carbon-constrained world.

Ramil Abbasov is a climate change and sustainability expert with over 14 years of experience in public finance management, climate finance, greenhouse gas emissions accounting, policy research, and economic analysis. He has worked closely with international organizations—including the United Nations Development Programme and the Asian Development Bank—to integrate climate risk assessments and mitigation strategies into financial governance frameworks.

Mr. Abbasov served as a Research Assistant at George Mason University, contributing to the NSF-funded Community-Responsive Electrified and Adaptive Transit Ecosystem (CREATE) project through quantitative data analysis and stakeholder engagement initiatives. Previously, he held key roles at the Asian Development Bank in Baku, Azerbaijan, as both the National Green Budget Economy Expert and the National Public Finance Management Expert, driving efforts in climate budget tagging, green economy analysis, and sustainable development policy integration.

In addition to his work with multilateral institutions, he is the CEO and Founder of "Spektr" Center for Research and Development, a research organization focused on advancing climate finance, energy transition, and sustainable economic policies. Mr. Abbasov's earlier career includes leadership positions such as Director at ZE-Tronics CJSC and managerial roles in the banking sector with AccessBank CJSC and retail management with Third Eye Communications in the USA.

Protecting Climate Refugees in Island Nations

Ryan Smith
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Global warming is causing glaciers and ice sheets to melt; sea levels continue to rise at unprecedented levels; and many coastal regions like the island nation of Kiribati, are quickly becoming the first victims of climate change. The debilitating effects of climate change continues to exacerbate the number of migrants and refugees from island nations who seek asylum or temporary residence outside their homes. In fact, the world recorded more than 20 million displacements due to climate disasters each year from 2019 to 2022 (MPI). Natural disasters like floods, droughts, and rising sea levels, are all displacing residents of island nations at alarming levels. Climate change and climate displacement are not merely threats of the future, but are already pervasive realities for many island nations today. As a result, 23% of migrants from Kiribati named climate change as their catalyst for migration (UN ESCAP (2016)), and the World Bank's worst-case estimate is that some 216 million people could either move internally or be completely displaced by 2050, as water becomes scarcer and agricultural livelihoods are threatened (World Bank, NPJ). However, unlike those seeking refuge due to war or fear of persecution, there are no comprehensive legal protections for migrants seeking refuge or asylum due to climate related reasons. As climate change continues to wreak havoc on vulnerable populations, international policy makers must recognize that climate refugees exist, and must implement "climate visas" and social protections in order to keep climate migrants safe.

The first step international policy makers must take in order to protect climate refugees is to actually acknowledge that they exist. The term "climate refugee" doesn't even exist in international law. Rather, the 1951 Refugee Convention is the only binding global treaty that establishes the definition of a "refugee." This definition—which only protects people who flee their country due to a credible "fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, or membership in a particular political or social group" is especially outdated, because it doesn't include the vast amount of people who are displaced due to climate related reasons. Therefore, policy makers need to either expand the legal term "refugee" to include people who flee their homes due to current or anticipated climate disasters, or they need to establish "climate refugee" as its own separate legal term; one that reflects the various reasons climate change forces individuals to migrate or seek refuge/asylum. We simply can't make any progress in protecting climate refugees if international law doesn't even acknowledge them as people deserving of protection.

Following the recognition of climate refugees as people worthy of protection under law, policy makers should take meaningful strides to support a "climate visa" that would set criteria for individuals to be protected as climate refugees in host countries. The criteria for this visa wouldn't be too dissimilar to the criteria migrants have to meet in order to be considered for asylum. Much like the "fear of persecution" and "unable to return" criterias that asylum seekers have to meet, climate refugees would be able to reasonably prove the fear that their home is (or will soon be) uninhabitable due to climate change. What's most important and encouraging to note is that these protections are not without precedent. The 2023 Australia-Tuvalu agreement confirms that Australia will provide migration pathways for Tuvaluan people facing the existential threat of climate change. Under the treaty, Australia will implement a special visa arrangement to allow Tuvaluans to work, study and live in Australia either due to or in anticipation of climate-related disasters. This is not quite a

Australia's steadfast and successful commitment to protect the island nation of Tuvalu with their fight against climate change should encourage other developed nations like the United States to do the same.

refugee visa, but rather will allow up to 280 Tuvaluans (from a population of around 11,200) to migrate to Australia each year – presumably on a permanent basis (UNSW). Additionally through the program, Tuvaluans "will be able to access Australian education, health care, and family support on arrival. This is a welcome development that will provide {climate migrants} with both legal and psychological security" (UNSW). Australia's steadfast and successful commitment to protect the island nation of Tuvalu with their fight against climate change should encourage other developed nations like the United States to do the same. In Kiribati, some islands are already uninhabitable, while more islands are expected to be fully submerged underwater in the near future (Iberdrola). If criteria such as these are met, developed countries like the United States—who fall in close proximity to Kiribati, should offer climate visas to refugees from these nations. These climate visas, much like the ones between Australia and Tuvalu, will allow climate migrants to inhabit a host country due to the fact that their homes have or will be destroyed, and/or are not safe to inhabit. When it comes to affected individuals migrating *internally*, as opposed to fleeing the country entirely, there are still ways the international community can safeguard these climate migrants, such as allocating disaster relief funds, supporting a centralized system for migrants to access available services and resources, and increasing transportation options (Enterprise).

Finally, international policy makers should follow in Australia's lead and implement different social programs and services that provide climate refugees access to housing, healthcare, education, and labor. Climate refugees often see their whole lives flipped upside down due to climate change. "Being dislocated from home is one of the greatest forms of cultural, social and economic loss people can suffer… {and} can often lead to inter-generational trauma" (UNSW). Therefore, there needs to be laws in place that offer climate refugees access to humanitarian aid. Whether it's paying hotels to house refugees like the Accommodation Recognition Payment (ARP) program in Ireland—which sprouted after Russia's invasion of Ukraine; or building specific housing in general, there needs to be policies that provide climate refugees access to affordable housing. Additionally, due to the potential health concerns that can arise from climate related disasters such as heat-related morbidity and mortality, and disaster-related injury (BMC Medicine), climate refugees should have access to affordable healthcare and healthcare protection. There also needs to be pathways that allow for climate refugees to get an education and a job, much like the "Mobility with Dignity" pathway precedent set through the Australia-Tuvalu agreement. All of these interconnected benefits will offer essential protections to climate refugees as they attempt to rebuild their lives away from home.

The effects of climate change are real and pervasive today. Wealthy and industrialized countries in Europe and North America have polluted our environment in catastrophic ways that affect island nations at a disproportionately high level. Europe, North America, and other nations in the Global North produce a carbon footprint 100 times greater than that of the world's poor nations combined (Generation Climate Europe); and yet, these developing countries are suffering far more from the effects of climate change than anybody else (Conservation International). Kiribati is the perfect example because while they are one of the first nations to bear the brunt of climate change, the nation state is responsible for just 0.6% of world greenhouse gas emissions (Iberdrola). Therefore, developed countries in the Global North have both an ethical and moral obligation to provide protection and assistance for individuals displaced by climate disasters, considering these disasters are reasonably traced back to their actions. While island nations continue to pay the price for other country's actions, international law must take swift action to protect climate refugees by legally acknowledging their existence, creating "climate visas," and funding social programs that provide housing, healthcare, and other essential needs.

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Sino-India Ties and the Trump Administration

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In 2024, after a hiatus of five years, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping held a bilateral discussion at the sidelines of the BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia. Soon after, India and China agreed on troop disengagement at two friction points at Demchok and Depsang plains in eastern Ladakh. In December 2024, the Indian National Security Advisor and Special Representative (SR) on the border, Ajit Doval was in China where after a meeting with the Chinese Foreign Minister and SR Wang Yi: The two sides agreed on issues such as to seek a fair, reasonable, and mutually acceptable framework to settle their border issue, not allow the border issue to hinder development in their bilateral ties, take measures to maintain peace at their border, strengthen cross-border cooperation, resume border trade, and to hold the next SR meeting at a "mutually convenient" time. In January 2025, Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri landed in Beijing. Misri and Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong reviewed the state of India-China bilateral relations and agreed to take steps to stabilize and rebuild their ties. The two sides agreed to resume pilgrimage to the Kailash Mansarovar, take steps to resume hydrological data sharing on transboundary rivers, promote people-to-people exchanges including between media and think tanks, restart direct flights between the two countries, hold activities to commemorate 75th anniversary of their diplomatic relations, and take measures to address specific trade and economic concerns.

Amidst this re-established political bonhomie, a question looms large: how long will the two sides remain politically engaged? Over the decades, India-China relations have followed a cyclical pattern, with phases of tension, cooperation, and cordiality following one another.

Unlike the skewed political ties, India-China economic relations largely follow a linear path. Their economic interaction exemplifies how the countries could remain economically engaged despite tensions and disputes. It also proves a hypothesis that even “non-friendly” countries cooperate if this mutually benefits them and has a good pay-off. For instance, even after political tensions following the military clash in Galwan Valley, India-China trade in 2021 crossed $125 billion, with imports from China at about US$100 billion. In 2022, trade reached to $135.98 billion favoring China, in 2023 it rose to $136.2 billion, and in 2024 there was a decline, and the bilateral trade was around $118.4 billion. Imports from China to India increased to $101.7 billion, while exports to China from India was $16.67 billion. Although trade was not affected, the Indian business community faces a tough situation due to restrictions on Chinese investments in India, visa restrictions, and the absence of direct flights between the two countries. To overcome such difficulties, the Indian business community was peddling for good working ties with China.

Besides longstanding bilateral disputes mainly on boundary matters, India-China ties are influenced by their global political ambition and other actors' activities in Asia and the world.

Besides longstanding bilateral disputes mainly on boundary matters, India-China ties are influenced by their global political ambition and other

actors' activities in Asia and the world. Among all, the most important actor is the USA. The USA's role in Asia, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, has escalated tensions in the continent. The main motive of the USA is to check the Chinese assertive presence in the Indo-Pacific region with the help of like-minded countries. For its own strategic purposes, India shares the USA's strategic vision. India is a part of QUAD whose member includes Australia, Japan and the USA; yet, it has maintained "strategic autonomy" and decides for itself. India going against other QUAD members on the question of Russia-Ukraine war and its decision to remain engaged with Moscow amidst sanctions on it from the Western world is an example.

Largely due to its own strategic reasons, the U.S. often frowns on India's engagement with China as it raises questions on India's commitment to QUAD's objective in the Indo-Pacific region. U.S.-China ties took a plunge in the last decade. There has been a further decline in the U.S.-China ties after Donald Trump's return as American President. In his initial set of executive orders, Trump's administration imposed a 10% additional tariff on imports from China. Beijing retaliated by levying a 15% additional tariff and 10% tariff on different set of imported products originating in the USA. Some of Trump's decisions have also affected India. For instance, the deportation of illegal Indian migrants in an inhuman and "degrading" way, angered many Indians. Also, President Trump's restoration of the "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, particularly the move to remove waivers on sanctions, may affect India's investment in Chabahar port.

During his visit to the USA on 13-14 February 2025, Narendra Modi held talks with Donald Trump. The two leaders launched the "U.S.-India COMPACT (Catalyzing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce & Technology) for the 21st Century" to further strengthen their ties. The two countries have ambitiously aimed to more than double their bilateral trade to $500 billion by 2030. It was agreed to make the U.S. the leading supplier of crude oil, petroleum products and liquified natural gas to India. India and the USA also launched U.S.-India TRUST ("Transforming the Relationship Utilizing Strategic Technology") initiative to catalyze government-to-government, academia and private sector collaboration. This aims to promote the application of critical and emerging technologies in sectors including defense, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum, biotechnology, energy, and space.

However, due to the entwined nature of global affairs and Trump's political position on trade and tariffs, immigration and political disputes between the countries, it is too early to predict how India-U.S. ties will unfold under the Trump administration. India is less likely to prune the depth of its ties with the USA. Yet the uncomfortable domestic and external political position and (un)intentional economic pressure on New Delhi may create some ripple in their ties, providing a reason – or even a tactical purpose – to further improve relations with Beijing. India-China ties do not entirely hinge on Washington's influence. However, given the nature of the global political structure and demand-supply economic chain, one cannot de-link it entirely or completely deny the spillover effect of impact of American policies on India-China relations.

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His papers, review essays, and book reviews have been widely published in journals, including Asian Survey, Asian Affairs, Asian Ethnicity, Asian Journal of Comparative Politics, Australian Journal of Ocean and Maritime Studies, Economic & Political Weekly, India Review, Indian Journal of Public Administration, India Quarterly, Indian Foreign Affairs Journal, Journal of the Indian Ocean Region, Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs, Journal of Contemporary African Studies, Social Change, Studies in Indian Politics, Society and Culture in South Asia, South Asia Research, Social Identities, Sikh Formations, South Asian Diaspora, The Roundtable: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs, Water History and World Water Policy, among others.

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Murky Waters: The Risks of the Philippines' South China Sea Strategy

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Introduction

On November 8, 2024, President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. signed into law two key maritime regulations: the Philippine Maritime Zones Act (MZA) and the Philippine Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act (ASLA).[1] The former aims to demarcate the country's territorial waters and assert rights over resources in the South China Sea (SCS), while the latter restricts foreign navigation by limiting eligible sea lanes through Philippine waters.[2] Despite concerns over enforcement, these laws have further heightened tensions in the SCS. China immediately condemned them as infringing on its sovereignty, leading to diplomatic protests and the summoning of the Philippine ambassador.[3] In retaliation, China published the baselines of the territorial sea adjacent to the Scarborough Shoal (known in China as Huangyan Dao), one of the waterway's most contested features.[4] Malaysia also protested, arguing that Manila's claims overstepped its 1979 New Map and interfered with its sovereignty over the oil-rich state of Sabah on Borneo island.[5]

The SCS disputes are not simply a "China vs Southeast Asian nations" narrative, as commonly believed, but rather a multifaceted geopolitical contest involving layers of competition—between Washington and Beijing, Beijing and Taipei, and Beijing and individual claimants, as well as among Southeast Asian states such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia.[6] This nested game is driven primarily by great power competition, with regional disputes playing a secondary role. The origins of these disputes can be traced back to the late 19th-century scramble by Western powers—such as Great Britain, France, and Japan—to secure strategic positions in the region. These tensions persisted through the interwar period and Cold War, evolving during America's unipolar moment, and were further intensified by the Obama Administration's 2011 Pivot to Asia, a strategy designed to counter China's rise.[7]

The Philippines and China have repeatedly clashed over disputed SCS islets, notably during the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff and following the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling.[8] Tensions escalated again throughout 2024, and are expected to persist, particularly as U.S.-China competition intensifies. The Philippines' strategic location and its century-old ties with the United States render it an indispensable part of America's Asia-Pacific security framework. As the largest recipient of U.S. security aid in the region, Manila has become a "frontline ally" for Washington, illustrated by the deployment of U.S.-supplied mid-range Typhon missiles and the recent exemption of security aid under the Trump Administration.[9]

However, as the well-known Kenyan proverb cautions, "when elephants fight, the grass gets trampled." This article examines the Philippines' South China Sea strategy through the lens of Singaporean diplomat-scholar Kishore Mahbubani's three geopolitical rules. The first rule warns of the cruelty of geopolitics and the consequences of naive decision-making. The second stresses the self-interest of great powers. The third advises against placing all geopolitical eggs in one basket. By applying these principles, the article assesses whether Manila's current trajectory is sustainable or if it exposes the country to long-term strategic risks.

Cruelty of Geopolitics

Mahbubani's first rule states that "geopolitics is a very cruel business and people who are naive and simplistic in their analysis of geopolitics always suffer."[10] Mahbubani stresses the harsh realities of geopolitics:

those who miscalculate or oversimplify global power dynamics often pay a steep price. Under President Marcos Jr., the Philippines has adopted a more assertive stance against China by strengthening military ties with the United States, Japan, Vietnam, France, and Germany.[11] As part of its efforts to counter Chinese incursions in the South China Sea, Manila has also leveraged global media coverage by inviting journalists from major outlets such as CNN and AFP to document its maritime patrols.[12] While this "assertive transparency"[13] approach is meant to rally international support, it risks overlooking key geopolitical realities.

One critical miscalculation is the assumption that openly defying a much stronger opponent will yield favorable results without severe consequences. Since the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff, the Philippines has relied heavily on legal rulings—most notably, the 2016 arbitral tribunal decision that invalidated China's nine-dash-line claims. The twin maritime laws introduced in 2024 follow the same logic—seeking to consolidate symbolic gains through legal means. However, China has consistently ignored these rulings, upon issuing a position paper with 93 articles explaining its rejection of the tribunal and its award.[14] Instead, China has quietly built up its navy on artificial islands, reinforcing physical control over disputed waters through gray-zone tactics such as harassing Philippine vessels.[15] While legal victories matter, they do not translate into immediate geopolitical change unless backed by credible enforcement mechanisms.

Furthermore, the Marcos administration's strategy of publicizing maritime confrontations with China—aimed at generating diplomatic support through "naming and shaming"—has yielded temporary gains but carries long-term risks.[16] As history has shown, moral arguments alone rarely alter the behavior of great powers. The ongoing war in Ukraine, coupled with the situations of Canada, Denmark and Panama, provides a stark reminder that global sympathy does not necessarily translate into decisive action against veto players—powerful actors whose consent is required to change policy. More concerningly, Manila appears to underestimate China's willingness to retaliate economically. Since 2012, Beijing has frequently turned to economic sanctions against adversaries, as demonstrated by the so-called Philippines banana crisis over the Scarborough Shoal,[17] its trade restrictions on South Korea following the deployment of THAAD missile defenses in 2017[18] and its economic measures against Australia amid political disputes in 2020.[19] Given the Philippines' economic dependence on Chinese trade and investment, a similar response from Beijing could have significant repercussions.

A *Diplomat* article aptly warns that while Beijing "has the time, resources, and willingness to sit down and wait for a mistake…Manila's position is infinitely more precarious."[20] Without a strategy that balances assertiveness with strategic caution, the Philippines risks provoking a response it cannot counter—placing both its security and economic stability in jeopardy.

The Self-Interest of Great Powers

Mahbubani's second rule reminds us that "all great powers including the United States will always put their own interest first and will never sacrifice their interest for even the best of friends." This cautionary principle is highly relevant to the Philippines' current foreign policy, which is increasingly reliant on Washington. Reflecting on this, during his first term at the United Nations, President Donald Trump declared, "We will never surrender America's sovereignty to an unelected, unaccountable global bureaucracy."[21] To Chinese ears, wasn't the arbitral tribunal established under UNCLOS also seen as an unelected and unaccountable body? This observation underscores how great powers often operate with a sense of impunity, facing few consequences for their actions.

Since taking office in July 2022, President Marcos has restored and deepened defense cooperation with the United States, granting expanded access to American forces under the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA)—a move that appears partly driven by concerns over contingencies related to Taiwan. The Philippines is also engaging in joint military exercises and hosting advanced U.S. missile systems, a notable shift away from the previous Duterte administration's attempt to balance relations between the U.S. and China.[22]

While these moves bolster deterrence, the assumption that the U.S. will clearly support the Philippines in a military conflict with China is

dangerous. History shows that Washington prioritizes its own strategic calculations. For example, during the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff between the Philippines and China, the Obama Administration facilitated negotiations without direct intervention, allowing China to take control of the shoal.[23] Similarly, despite its security commitments to Ukraine, the U.S. has avoided direct military engagement with Russia —highlighting the limits of American intervention when dealing with major powers.

Great powers tend to understand each other's mindset. As James Holmes, Professor of Strategy at the Naval War College and coauthor of *Red Star over the Pacific*, warns, "War could result should these governments persist in standing up for themselves. Reaffirming its support for Japan, the Philippines, or other Asian partners could embroil the United States in a conflict not of its making and deeply inimical to its interests." Holmes further cautions that it is "better for Washington to curtail this misbegotten, self-defeating enterprise before things turn ugly in the East China Sea or South China Sea."[25]

The critical question for the Marcos administration is whether it has overestimated U.S. support in a potential crisis. While the U.S. has repeatedly reaffirmed that its mutual defense treaty with the Philippines covers attacks in the South China Sea, strategic ambiguity remains.[26] If a confrontation escalates beyond isolated skirmishes, Washington's willingness to go to war with China is far from guaranteed. Relying too heavily on the U.S. without cultivating a robust independent defense strategy could leave the Philippines vulnerable to abandonment or to unfavorable trade-offs in broader U.S.-China negotiations.

Furthermore, the administration's public criticisms of China—such as President Marcos' denouncement of China's new policy that empowers its coast guard to detain foreigners as "completely unacceptable"[27] —have intensified diplomatic strains. While these declarations assert Philippine sovereignty, they also contribute to the growing risk that the U.S.-China rivalry will expose the Philippines to strategic vulnerabilities.

Danger of a One-Sided Strategy

Mahbubani's third rule—"Never put all your geopolitical eggs in one basket"—serves as a critical warning for the Philippines today. The country's increasing tilt toward the United States and its allies risks alienating China without securing a comprehensive alternative.

Unlike other Southeast Asian nations such as Vietnam and Indonesia, which maintain strategic flexibility by engaging both Washington and Beijing, the Philippines has positioned itself firmly within the U.S. orbit. This is evident not only in its security agreements but also in its diplomatic rhetoric, with President Marcos Jr. openly criticizing Chinese actions.[28] While this approach has strengthened ties with the West, it also exposes Manila to significant economic and political vulnerabilities.

In 2023, China was the Philippines' largest trading partner; however, later that year, Manila withdrew its membership from the Belt and Road Initiative.[29] China's economic retaliation remains a potent tool in Beijing's toolbox. Sanctions, investment pullbacks, and tourism restrictions have already harmed the Philippine economy in similar instances, as seen when China punished countries like South Korea and Australia over political disputes. By limiting its engagement with China, Manila risks forfeiting opportunities for negotiation and economic cooperation that could serve as a counterweight to growing security tensions.

In February this year, Philippine Senator Aquilino Pimentel III—Senate Minority Leader and former Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman—proposed that the Philippines apply to join BRICS. Pimentel advocates for a balanced foreign policy in response to Trump 2.0, signaling a desire to diversify the country's strategic partnerships beyond its heavy reliance on the United States.[30]

A more balanced approach would involve maintaining strong defense ties with the U.S. while also keeping diplomatic and economic channels open with China.[31] ASEAN nations that have successfully navigated tensions with Beijing have done so through a mix of deterrence, economic

> The [Philippine] administration's assertiveness in the South China Sea reflects a recognition of geopolitical realities, yet it also exposes the country—as the weaker actor in a fundamentally asymmetric conflict—to significant risks.

engagement, and quiet diplomacy. Without such a balanced strategy, the Philippines risks becoming a frontline state in the U.S.-China rivalry without sufficient leverage to protect its national interests.

Conclusion

Kishore Mahbubani's three rules of geopolitics offer valuable insights into the Philippines' current foreign policy direction under President Marcos Jr. The administration's assertiveness in the South China Sea reflects a recognition of geopolitical realities, yet it also exposes the country—as the weaker actor in a fundamentally asymmetric conflict—to significant risks. The first rule cautions against naivety, but Manila's approach appears overly reliant on legal frameworks and assertive transparency without sufficient military deterrence. The second rule highlights the self-interest of great powers, reminding the Philippines that U.S. support is not guaranteed. The third rule warns against placing all strategic bets on one partner, a risk the Philippines is currently taking by heavily leaning toward the United States.

A more nuanced approach—one that strengthens defense ties with allies while also engaging pragmatically with China through dialogue and diplomacy—would better serve the Philippines in the long run. By adhering to Mahbubani's principles, the country can navigate the treacherous waters of great power competition, safeguarding its sovereignty and economic stability while ensuring a more balanced regional posture.

* *Views expressed here are solely of this author and do not represent those of the author's affliation in the past or the present.*

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Myanmar's Post-Coup Landscape: Could 2025 mark a turning point for the ongoing conflict, international engagement, or the humanitarian crisis?

Isabel Jijon
Sciences Po, France

Since the military coup in February 2021, Myanmar has experienced significant political upheaval, widespread civil conflict, and a deepening humanitarian crisis, leading it to confront what the United Nations Development Programme has called a “polycrisis” (Mishra, 2025).

By analyzing 2024 developments, including the advance of opposition groups, diplomatic strategies, a worsening economic, social, and humanitarian situation exacerbated by natural disasters, this study aims to examine whether 2025 could represent a pivotal moment for democratic movements, international engagement, humanitarian aid and refugee return.

By the end of 2024, Myanmar’s military junta controlled 21% of the national territory. Rebel forces, including the People’s Defense Force (PDF) and ethnic-based armed groups, control 42% of the territory (Council for Foreign Relations). The PDF is the armed wing of the National Unity Government (NUG) which aims to establish a “federal democratic union” (NUG Press Release, 2025). In face of flagrant human rights abuses and perceived illegitimacy of the junta, domestic and international approval of the NUG have soared, and between 2022 to 2024, they gained around 20 000 new members, now totaling around 85 000. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data collection organization (ACLED) has recorded over 2600 new non-state actors participating in Myanmar’s conflict since the coup, most in resistance to the systematic repression, detention, torture, sexual assault, and killings of protesters.

Operational coordination has been essential in pushing back the army. Some ethnic armed organizations have officially established a command-and-control structure with the NUG, while others have informally cooperated with it on individual military operations by providing shelter, training, or launching joint operations (Mendelson, 2023). In one notable example, the Mandalay PDF blocked military reinforcements from advancing to Shan state to engage the Brotherhood Alliance (Arakan, National Democratic Alliance, and Ta’ang National Liberation Armies). This allowed the alliance to capture 23 towns in late 2023. Coordination between groups has led to the capture of at least 80 towns and 200 military bases. In 2024, the rebel groups seized wide swathes of the country’s west and northeast, overrunning two of the regime’s regional command bases for the first time, transforming the conflict environment and tide (Zsombor, 2025).

In last year’s census, the Ministry of Immigration and Population was scarcely able to count the inhabitants in 145 out of 330 townships because of armed and civilian resistance (Mcready, 2025). The NUG dismissed the planned coming elections in November 2025 as a sham intended to legitimize the regime’s fragile hold on power; and emphasized that they would not lead to stability but to increased instability and violence. Despite significant advances, ACLED notes that cooperation within the opposition is still nascent, unstable, and fluid. Despite the overarching goal of opposing the regime, it is hindered by competition for resources, territorial control, and differing political visions. Some

Moving forward, systematic collaboration by the opposition groups will be critical in the military and political fight against the junta.

opposition factions want autonomy, while others aim towards a federal system. The lack of political consensus prevents the formation of a united front against military rule. Moving forward, systematic collaboration by the opposition groups will be critical in the military and political fight against the junta.

However, as of now, the junta continues to dominate the populated economic heartland, and maintains financial and technological leverage over the opposition, bolstered by critical support from China and Russia. Beijing has historically maintained close ties with both the military junta and various ethnic organizations along their shared border to prevent spillovers. It has mediated cease-fires, such as the short-lived "Haigeng agreement" but struggles to enforce lasting peace. Its major concern is protecting its Belt and Road Initiative projects, especially the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. It has pressured some ethnic armed organizations such as the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army to limit arms sales to other rebel groups. Without their help, other groups have had to scale back their push towards Myanmar's second biggest city of Mandalay. It has contributed to undermining cooperation, and thus the realization of democratic aspirations (Graceffo, 2024). An independent analyst tracking the conflict, Matthew B.Arnold, estimates that much of the conflict will depend on China's strategic decision on whether the junta continues to be the right fit to protect its investments and interests in the region: "that will be the question for 2025" (Zsombor, 2025). The U.S, the E.U, and Australia recognize the NUG as Myanmar's legitimate government and have applied diplomatic pressure and targeted sanctions against junta high-ranking officials, but avoid direct military assistance. With the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza, this seems unlikely to change in the short term. ASEAN has blocked the junta from regional summits, but internal disagreements impede the implementation of its Five-Point Consensus aimed at resolving the crisis (Jones, 2025).

A concerning aspect of the conflict is the increasing difficulty in providing protection of civilians: more than 6,5 million have had to flee their homes due to violence (Institute for Strategy and Policy - Myanmar, 2024). Since 2021, the government has destroyed more than 75,000 homes, killed over 4,600 activists, and there are reports of villagers used as human shields in the crossfire (Htet, 2024). Vulnerable and marginalized communities are at exponential risk. The Rohingya have suffered from institutionalized discrimination and waves of violence such as the one in August of 2017, when 288 Rohingya villages in the State of Rakhine, where the majority live, were burnt down (Human Rights Watch, 2017). The High Commissioner for Human Rights described it as a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing". These campaigns resulted in mass refugee exodus to Bangladesh, as well as the interruption of economic activity in Rakhine, where at the present levels of food insecurity, famines are expected by mid-2025. In December 2024, the Arakan Army, an ethnic Buddhist militant group, successfully took control of Rakhine. Rohingyas may still face persecution. With their villages turned to soil, and no optimistic prospects for better citizenship and socioeconomic conditions, their return seems difficult for now. The 90-day pause on foreign humanitarian assistance mandated by the U.S. President in January will have severe impacts on the already limited life-saving aid from the World Food Program, from which 1 million people will be cut off by April. Finding alternative donors will prove critical in safeguarding the livelihoods of millions of burmese.

Since 2020, Myanmar's GDP has contracted by 9%, and is expected to contract by 1 percent in the fiscal year ending March 2025 (World Bank). With over half of townships experiencing active conflict, supply chains and trade are continuously disrupted. Adding to these compounding crises, Typhoon Yagi and heavy monsoons triggered grave floods and mudslides in around 70 townships, and destroyed hundreds of thousands of acres of crops (Marsh, 2024). Largely due to conflict and climate-related disasters, agricultural productivity has declined by 16%, and hunger is reaching catastrophic levels (Mishra, 2025).

Entering 2025, pro-democracy opposition forces are gaining ground and widening cracks in the military regime. Internal divisions and foreign influence will shape the conflict's trajectory. Widespread political violence, instability and natural disasters have engulfed the country in increasingly severe economic and humanitarian hardship, which in 2025 could reach extreme levels. Within the 18,6 millions in need of humanitarian aid, minorities and vulnerable populations will be hit the hardest. The UN warns that the coming year will test Myanmar's resilience to its limits.

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Middle Power Competition in Africa and the Prospect for Regional Peace and Stability

Professor Milkessa Gemechu
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Africa is increasingly becoming the focus of competition not only from major powers including China, Europe, Russia, and the U.S. but it has become the new battleground among the Middle East middle powers including Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and United Arab Emirates (UAE). Inter-state and intrastate conflicts and prospects for peace remain the major concerns of several African states. International relations theories offer three broad levels of analysis —system, state, and individual—to better understand the causes and actors of conflicts and peace. In this paper, I want to discuss the systemic factors emphasizing the role of middle powers in some of the current conflicts and efforts to resolve them in Africa.

It is common to read systemic factors into conflicts in Africa being dominated by foreign policies of global major powers– China, Europe, Russia, and the U.S. This seemingly dominant analysis misses the remarkable rising influences and competition among the Middle East middle powers especially in the economic, military, and diplomatic sectors in Africa. This paper casts brief light on the middle power competition in Africa focusing on the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey in some of the current conflicts and peace processes in the sub-region. I argue that the escalating competition among these emerging middle powers to establish client states in Africa is adversely affecting peace and stability of the continent and needs better attention.

Let me start with the new role of Saudi Arabia in Africa. Saudi Arabia organized its first ever Saudi-Africa Summit on 10 November 2023 to elevate its sphere of influence in Africa with 50 African leaders and senior government officials attending the summit, covering issues like debt relief, diplomacy, security, economic development, humanitarian aids, and Riyad's mediation offers. In the Horn of Africa, with the coming to power in April 2018 of Abiy Ahmed, the current prime minister of Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia brokered a "historic" peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia which was signed in September 2018 in Riyad; with the UN Secretary General, the African Union Commission Chairperson , and the UAE Foreign Minister in attendance. The peace agreement ended two decades of "no peace no war" deadlock that followed the 1998-2000 bloody conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. As a result of this peace agreement, the prime minister of Ethiopia was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 hoping that the signing of the agreement "will contribute to strengthening security and stability in the Horn of Africa region."

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is not limited to the Arabian Peninsula as in Yemen, it also plays out in Africa. For instance, Sudan had a long history of military cooperation with Iran before their relations ended in 2016 due to the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, with Sudan siding with Saudi Arabia. However, since the start of the current civil war in Sudan, the Sudanese government led by the army has restored relations with Tehran for strategic reasons. Iranian drone supplies have been shaping the course of many conflicts in Africa including in Sudan and Ethiopia.

In addition to drone supplies, Iran organized its first Iran-West Africa Economic Summit in 2023. The second Iran-Africa summit, which is scheduled to be held in Tehran in April 2025, is expected to see more than 30 African countries.

On the other hand, the UAE has become "a major player in East Africa" due to its increasing multifaceted influences in Sudan and Ethiopia.

Since 2018, Ethiopia has become the "UAE's vital partner in the Horn of Africa" with greater strategic influence in the country. Within a few months after Abiy Ahmed took office in Ethiopia, it "provided USD 3 billion in aid and investment" to help him establish his new administration. According to many observers, the UAE's continued sway over Ethiopia is exacerbating tensions between Ethiopia and other countries in the Red Sea region, namely Egypt, Eritrea, and Somalia. This may continue to have geopolitical and security implications for the sub-region of the Horn of Africa.

In the economic sector, the UAE is the fourth-largest investor in Africa, after China, Europe and the US according to recent reports. In the last decade, data from the report shows that it has invested nearly $60bn in infrastructure and energy sectors across the continent. "DP World in Tanzania: The UAE firm taking over Africa's ports" was BBC's headline on 23 October 2023. According to this report, a multimillion-dollar deal signed between Emirati maritime giant DP World and the Government of Tanzania looks set to further entrench the dominance of the UAE in Africa's freight industry.

The new rapprochement brokered by Saudi Arabia in 2018 between Ethiopia and Eritrea turned into a military alliance against the Tigray regional state of Ethiopia in 2020. Eritrea provided military support to the central government of Ethiopia including direct intervention in the domestic conflict in Tigray, northern Ethiopia, between November 2020 until November 2022. The UAE is said to have provided the largest military, financial, and diplomatic support for Ethiopia to conduct the war in Tigray. In November 2022, the African Union brokered a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, commonly referred to as the Pretoria Agreement, which was signed in Pretoria, South Africa between the Government of Ethiopia and Tigrayan forces. Following the signing of the Pretoria Agreement, tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea began to escalate and the Eritrean forces refused to withdraw from Ethiopian territories they occupied during the recent conflict endangering the implementation of the Agreement. Since the early month of March 2025, tensions have been rising between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Ethiopia, which is a landlocked state, is escalating its rhetoric of historical right to have access to sea outlets through Eritrea's Assab port. As a result, many commentators are calling for middle powers including the UAE to take responsible action to stop the next Ethiopia-Eritrea war: "Gulf states and their Western allies must halt an impending conflict that could inflame the entire Red Sea region." If such a war breaks out, the UAE and Saudi Arabia could stand opposite each other. While the UAE backs Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia does not seem to be so happy to see Ethiopia invade Eritrea and take control of Assab on the Red Sea.

During the peace process of the Pretoria Agreement mediated by the African Union which ended the war in northern Ethiopia in 2022, the U.S. and European Union had played great roles. However, middle powers, especially the UAE, which continues to provide both military and diplomatic support for the Ethiopian government, were not invited to attend. The problem in Tigray did not get a political solution, civil war continues to rage in Oromia and Amhara, and now there is a renewed rising tension in Tigray. It is well documented that Turkey has been a major drone supplier to the Ethiopian government, which was able to use drones to prevent rebels from capturing Ethiopia's capital city in 2022. The use of drones in Africa has exacerbated human rights violations in the continent. This is related to the problem that "drone distributor countries including China, Iran, Turkey, and the UAE do not insist their clientele respect human rights."

Backed by the UAE, the landlocked Ethiopian state has been looking for a sea outlet since 2018. To achieve this vision, in January 2024, the leaders of Ethiopia and Somaliland – a breakaway territory seeking independence from Somalia – signed a memorandum of understanding granting Ethiopia a 50-year lease to a strip of coastline on the Gulf of Aden. This deal worsened the relationship between Somalia and Ethiopia; and caused massive diplomatic pressure on the Ethiopian leader, who dropped the deal in December 2024 following a Turkish led mediation between Ethiopia and Somalia in Ankara.

Foreign Policy magazine wrote in January 2025 "How Turkey Became Africa's Mediator" following the latter's successful "brokering a deal between Ethiopia and Somalia," and its attempts "to end Sudan's civil war." Thus, in addition to arms transfers including drone supplies to the continent, Turkey has also begun to play critical diplomatic, security,

...it has abundantly become clear that the Middle East middle powers have established their military, economic, and diplomatic footholds in Africa shaping both regional conflicts and peace in the continent.

economic, and mediation roles in Africa. Since 2008, there have been three Africa-Turkish partnership summits held in Ankara. On 24 January 2025, Turkey offered diplomatic support in resolving the conflict between Rwanda and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), while Western powers have imposed sanctions or are considering sanctions against Rwanda.

The involvement of the UAE and other middle powers has been fueling the Sudanese civil war, which broke out in April 2023 between two rival factions: the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Sudan has been under military rule since the downfall of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019. Foreign military influence "notably from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has deepened the rivalry at the core of Sudan's crisis." The Sudanese government led by the SAF recently filed a complaint to the International Court of Justice, "accusing the UAE of complicity in genocide due to its arms support for the RSF." On the other hand, Turkish and Iranian drones have been critical for the Sudanese army in its war with the RSF.

In conclusion, one would question whether the new middle power competition in Africa will deescalate, and those powers start to act responsibly in the years to come. But it has abundantly become clear that the Middle East middle powers have established their military, economic, and diplomatic footholds in Africa shaping both regional conflicts and peace in the continent. Therefore, any Western or non-western backed efforts to resolve conflicts, for instance, in Sudan or in Ethiopia or elsewhere in Africa, in which the middle powers are greatly involved, need the full support of the latter. Thus, the new middle power competition in Africa and their impacts on regional security needs special attention.

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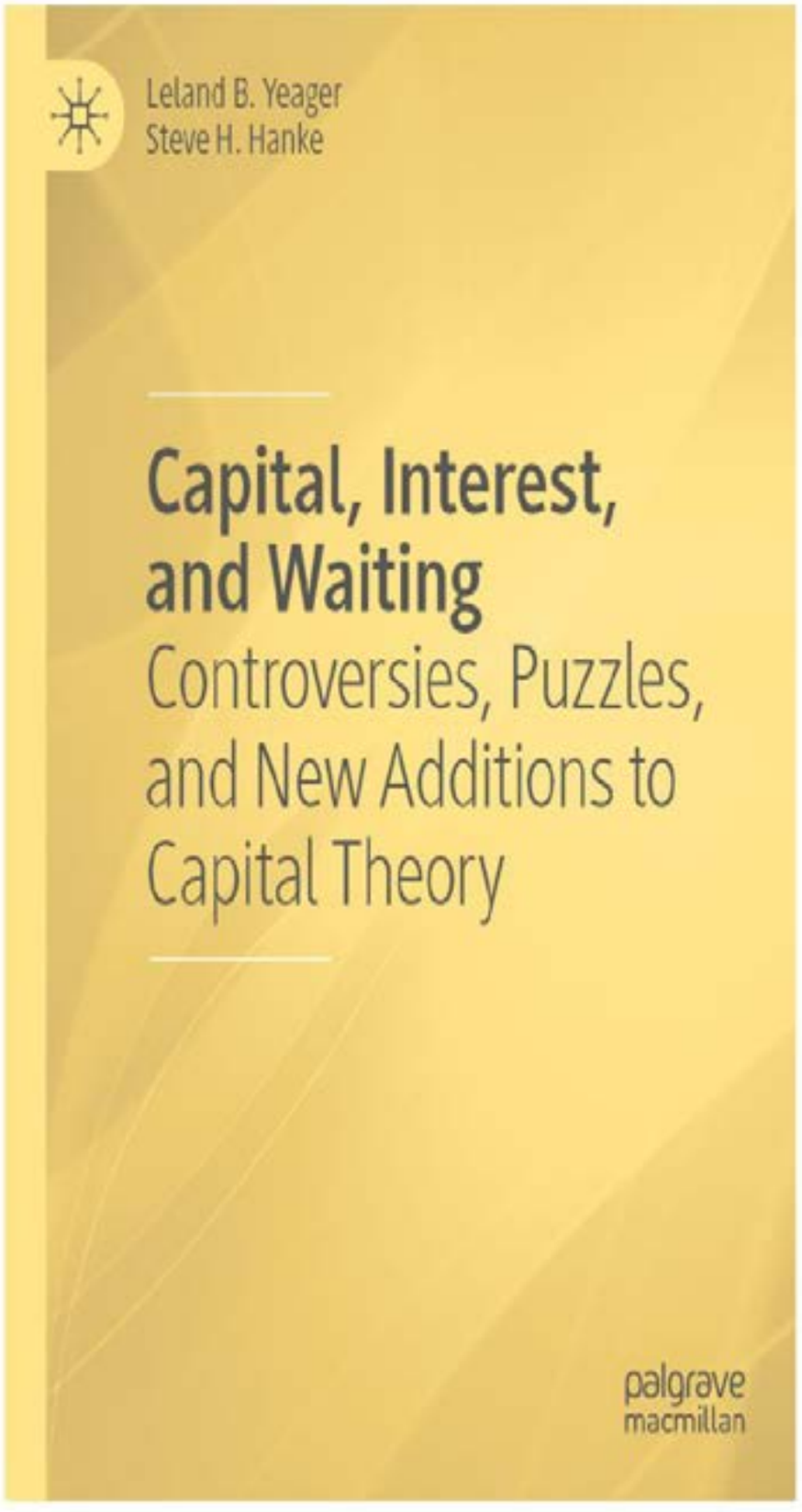

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Friedrich Merz's Gambit for a Renewed Germany: An Ambitious Leadership in Murky Waters

Francesco Stuffer
Spykman International Center for Geopolitical Analysis, France

Forty-five days after the February elections, Germany has announced its new government agreement. It may seem a long time, but in the political culture of modern Germany, this deal has been a quick one.

The parties that struck it are the conservatives (CDU/CSU), led by the future Chancellor Friedrich Merz and the center-left social-democrats (SPD). This coalition is not a novelty in Berlin, as these two parties have nearly always been in power, whether coalesced or with other political formations, since 1949. The 2025 elections however, marked a crucial point because of their importance for the whole of Europe, and for the impact in relations with the U.S.

The crucial themes of the coalition agreement are the same as the recent electoral campaign: the question of defense and rearmament are pivotal, along with energy and migration.

During the campaign, CDU's leader and future Chancellor Friedrich Merz particularly emphasized the migration theme, heralding a strict rhetoric that sometimes was in line with the AfD, Germany's far right party. This thematic alignment reached its peak at the end of January, when the CDU and the AfD voted together on a motion about migration in parliament.

From a 'non-German' perspective, Merz's choice has nothing extraordinary: recently, in many European countries, centet-right parties have moved towards more pronounced right-wing positions, especially on migration policy issues.

Although the vote was not about a future legislation but only a motion, its political effects were important: the AfD still carries the ultra-nationalist stigma, which often results in open accusations of Nazi sympathies or nostalgia. Isolated until yesterday on the German political scene, this was the first point of contact with a mainstream party - although the CDU kept its promise to not form an alliance with the AfD after the elections, choosing the SPD as its government partner.

Besides this controversial parliamentary moment, Merz's attitude during the election campaign and in the aftermath has been very proactive. With his dynamic attitude he wanted to signal a renewal of the German leadership, both internally and externally. In fact, as he was widely regarded as the future Chancellor, he could act as a leader even before the announcement of the CDU-SPD agreement.

During these months, Merz's words and actions promised a time of crucial reforms and renewal in Germany. However, announcements of a similar tone were proclaimed also by the former Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, especially in 2022. The SPD leader spoke of "Zeitenwende", a momentous U-turn, as he presented the rearmament plan launched after the Russian invasion of Ukraine - a complete turnaround of the Bundeswehr, in order to make it a modern and efficient force, but also to put aside the historical reticence that Germans have related to the role of their armed forces.

In Scholz's intentions, the German rearmament was supposed to be the re-starting point for a country in trouble, whose economy is stagnating and that is losing its leadership in Europe. But the rhetoric of the epochal changes quickly became political. The SPD allies of the time, the Green

The main challenge for the new chancellor will be to give a direction to the country in a period where "epochal turning points" affecting it on the international stage may happen once a month.

Party, announced its own “Wende” (change): in this case ‘Energiewende’, the transformation of the energy sector which, for now, had unhappy effects (both for the Green party, no more in government, and for Germany itself, which suffered higher energy prices without drastically reducing its carbon footprint).

The point is that despite numerous announcements of great changes by German leaders, the real upheavals for Berlin have come from outside, not from within. In recent years, Germany has been profoundly hit by international reversals, something it still finds difficult to govern. The term ‘Wende’ has a deep historical significance in German, as it refers to the events that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and to the reunification of the country.

During that juncture (1989 - 1991), foreign dynamics - above all the crisis of the Soviet Union - favored the fall of the GDR, deprived of its most powerful ally, and allowed the second German unification. Today, on the other hand, Berlin is being affected and damaged by what is happening outside its borders: if really a ‘Wende’ is happening, Germany is suffering from it

In three years of announcements of forthcoming major changes, Germany managed to change very little. The main challenge for the new chancellor will be to give a direction to the country in a period where "epochal turning points" affecting it on the international stage may happen once a month. Whether a new and proactive man like Friedrich Merz will succeed remains to be seen: the changes that have hit Germany equally exposed its internal divisions and limits to its action.

The international upheavals that affect Germany are all triggered by the major world powers, to which Berlin is linked in various ways. Having relied heavily on China as a reference market for its exports, Germany first suffered isolation during the pandemic moment and then competition from Beijing, which in some sectors went from being a customer to a competitor (the electric vehicles sector is perhaps the more evident example of that trend).

Germany learned no lessons from its own historical experience: the expression "made in Germany" originated as a pejorative label that the British, in the 19th century, applied to German goods, which at the time were cheaper copies of lower quality of the British products. Within a few decades, however, German industry shed the "made in Germany" label of infamy, taking more and more market share away from the British and becoming over time synonymous with industrial excellence. The Chinese trajectory is now similar: "made in China" today no longer just indicates mass production of manufactured goods of often low-grade but cheap material, but in various sectors Beijing is well ahead of the Europeans (and of the Germans in particular, as in the aforementioned electric vehicles branch).

The security and energy dimension of the German crisis came from the east, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Cheap Russian energy, whose symbolic infrastructure was the North Stream pipeline, now out of use after the sabotage of September 2022[1], was the fuel for the German industrial machine.

Furthermore, the Russian attack changed the balance of power within Europe. The importance of the Central and Eastern European countries, above all Poland, increased. These countries have not hesitated to point the finger precisely at Berlin, accused of pursuing excessively pro-Russian policies and of lack of attention when they denounced Moscow's aggressiveness in the last decades. Germany's relationship with this region is ambivalent: on the one hand, several of these countries have very strong economic, financial, cultural, and historical ties with Germany, but on the other hand, the different perception about the threat coming from Russia, the apparent German inaction, and Berlin's previous apparent connivance with Moscow – as, for example, in the energy sector[2] - have tarnished Germany's reputation in the region.

This part of the continent unveils the complexities of the German foreign

projection, as Berlin has been unwilling to develop militarily, but remains economically indispensable. To define Germany's position in Europe, Claire Demesmay speaks of an 'uncomfortable' leadership[8]: for historical and memorial reasons, Berlin has not sought to play a leading role on the continent - at the same time, however, especially in the eastern region, there is no country that can rival or replace it as a reference power (Poland dreams of doing so but is still far from being able to achieve it).

Moreover, at a European level, French instability contributed in making Germany weaker - if the image of the 'Franco-German' engine is more popular in Paris than in Berlin, it is equally true that the two largest European countries are going through phases of political volatility that push them to seek an in-house resolution of their problems before adopting a continental perspective. In this sense, Merz's chancellery, supported by a comfortable CDU/CSU-SPD majority, could lead Germany to regain stability and to make Berlin's voice stronger at a continental level. Moreover, the aggressiveness of the first months of the Trump administration pushed some European countries to re-group under their leaders, which gained in stability by proclaiming the emergency of a transatlantic threat.

Donald Trump's re-election has been the third moment in the crisis of certainties for German foreign policy. The Bundesrepublik's main security reference - for as long as it has existed in this form - seems to want to give in to its deepest impulses, without much regard for yesterday's allies. The willingness to shut down the war in Ukraine without consulting the Ukrainians (and neither the Europeans or the Germans) points to a downgrading of transatlantic ties, on which Berlin had continued to rely for its security (one of the major suppliers for the post-2022 rearmament plan was indeed the U.S.).

It is precisely the question of German rearmament - thus the "original Zeitenwende" - that highlights all the constraints Germany has to deal with today. A report by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW) published in autumn 2024 assesses the situation two years after, pointing out the slowness and inadequacy of German and European supply capacities. The IfW economists blame the disarmament of recent years and today's industrial inefficiencies, pointing out that at current rates, for some weapons systems, German arsenals will return to 2004 levels only in a hundred years. The Kiel report emphasizes Germany's difficulties in terms of spending capacity, hoping for an improvement in terms of efficiency and integration of the defence industry at a European level. The spending capacity issue is crucial for many sectors in today's Germany, which finds itself in difficulty both in allocating its resources and in setting its priorities at national level. This question is crucial: Merz is now Chancellor because the Scholz government fell in November after a quarrel with Christian Lindner's Liberals (FDP), which, in order to regain consensus, defended a strict budget policy, while the Socialists and Greens proposed an expansion of public spending. Linder's gamble failed, and the Liberals are today out of the Bundestag after the February anticipated elections. In this regard, Merz's action has been timely: even if he still has not been appointed Chancellor, he convinced the former Parliament to modify the German constitution, allowing the country to expand its public deficit more than before.

This swift reform could be a good starting point for its government, even if now that the 'external' pillars of the German model have collapsed (export to China, energy from Russia, political-economic integration with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Franco-German axis and security guaranteed by the United States), it is particularly difficult for Berlin to reorient itself. Germany is multi-centered, has different interests due to its structure, and history (the witty adage 'I love Germany so much that I am glad that there are two of them' has a grain of truth). Formally, it is a federal country, unified just thirty-five years ago, but crossed by profound differences between East and West in almost every field, a division that is flagrant in political, economic, and demographic terms. In addition to the persistent division between the former GDR and BRD, cultural differences exists between the Rhineland, the northern port cities, and the Bavarian particularism - economically and politically very important: here the German majority party, the CDU, does not exist, but reigns the CSU (with which the CDU is indeed twinned, but which remains a separate entity).

In the economic sphere, too, the parcelling of power is considerable - when big firms have to take long-term decisions, the banks, the land where the company is based and which owns shares in it, and the trade unions are also heavily involved in the process. This, on one hand, ensures the representation of different interests, but complicates strategic

decision-making. Especially at a time when the development paradigm that worked until recently is no longer valid.

The German political system, parliamentary and based on compromises, reflects the nature of the country and has shown fragility in this period of crisis (that a chancellor does not complete its mandate is a rare event in Germany).

The campaigning prominence of the probable future chancellor and his path within the CDU - he has never even been a minister, and came to the head of the party in 2022, after failing the two previous leadership assaults - allow him to present himself as a new face. Unfortunately for him, however, the complexities of Germany will not vanish after his eventual ascension to the chancellery.

A new man at the head of a traditional team could, however, be a good mix of innovation and tradition for Germany. If Merz succeeds in becoming aware of the limits with which the Germany of 2025 has to deal, it will be a good starting point, for Berlin, for the whole of Europe and for its own government. The country's divisions do not make it ungovernable and, even if it is actually in recession, it still has considerable resources. By extension, just as Germany suffered from global instability, the rest of the continent suffers from German instability. And if Berlin regains some vigor by embarking on a serious path of reform this will be good news for the whole continent.

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South Korean Democracy in 2025: Backsliding or Building Up?

Andrew Staser
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On December 4, 2024, South Koreans poured out into the streets to oppose President Yoon's declaration of martial law, again proving the people's commitment to democracy. Yet, the failure to prosecute Yoon effectively, and the instability that has resulted in the following months, has also shown the government's indifference to democracy. What has transpired over the past four months has revealed the fragility of new democratic institutions, the danger of politically polarized nations, and the importance of formal checks on power. How South Korean politics unfolds throughout 2025 will illustrate the strength and resolve of democracy in South Korea.

History of Authoritarianism

For the past four decades, South Korea has been a stable democracy and a supporter of the liberal international order. However, this has not been the dominant history of South Korea. Democracy at independence appeared promising— South Korea had established voting rights, a parliament, a constitution, and their first election saw ninety-five percent voter participation.[1] However, the first president, Syngman Rhee, quickly transformed the country into an authoritarian state. But Rhee's election fraud and corruption sparked mass demonstrations in 1960, leading to Rhee's resignation and a military coup led by Park Chung Hee in the following year. Park rigged four elections before declaring martial law and eliminating opposition leaders for eight years.[2]

Following Park's assassination, South Korea was plagued by authoritarian leaders until nationwide protests forced free and fair elections in 1987, dismantling the autocratic regime that had ruled South Korea. The people have proven their power repeatedly to establish and defend democracy, yet there exists a disconnect between the people and their government's commitment to democracy. Today, while a minority in the country, Yoon's supporters continue to embrace him throughout his trial,[3] and at times resort to violence.[4] These protesters' nostalgia for a tyrant is destabilizing and threatens the longevity of the republic. Stable democracies cannot coherently exist without broad support from all parties and obedience to institutions -Yoon has broken both of these rules. The illiberal use of power by Yoon is nothing new, but a return to a darker era of authoritarian rhetoric and action.

Inflamed Polarization

Yoon's victory in the 2022 election was extremely narrow, winning by less than one percent of the vote and with approval ratings below fifty percent.[5] The opposition party won parliamentary control and increased its majority in 2024, leading to investigations and impeachments into Yoon and his cabinet, successfully removing two cabinet ministers. Yoon, facing slumping approval ratings from controversies and scandals[6] and a strong opposition party that was refusing to work with him, began decrying his political opposition. Unable to collaborate with parliament, Yoon attempted the ultimate gambit: a brazen declaration of martial law to usurp power from the legislature. In Yoon's declaration, he stated his intention was to protect citizens against North Korea and "eliminate anti-state elements,"[7] but do not mistake this empty rhetoric for the truth. North Korea is a threat, but not one that has acted in a way that would prompt such a radical action. Yoon, politically unpopular and unable to cooperate with the legislative branch, attempted to seize power for himself by

declaring martial law- not to protect South Korea, but for selfish political ambition.

Lack of Constitutional Checks

The root of this crisis is found at the source of the president's power: the constitution. The South Korean constitution provides the president the ability to declare martial law unilaterally. These sweeping powers allow the president to suspend "warrants, freedom of speech, the press, assembly and association, or the powers of the Executive and the Judiciary" as prescribed by article seventy-seven of the constitution.[8] The legislature can overturn these martial law orders, as demonstrated last year, but a president with dictatorial aspirations may not yield to the legislature or may empower the military to prevent the members of parliament from forming a quorum. In addition to this, there are other powers that the president can exploit unilaterally. These include Article seventy-three, which allows the president to declare war or enter treaties, and Article seventy-nine, which enables the president to grant pardons or amnesty.[9] These three articles have few checks from the legislative branch, giving the president disproportionate influence to enact policies under the pretense of a national crisis or for political benefit, even at the expense of democracy.

Korean Democracy in 2025

This year, the validity of President Yoon's impeachment will be determined by the eight justices of the Constitutional Court. Either the court will uphold the impeachment and remove Yoon from office, or they will overturn it, returning Yoon to the presidency.

If six justices vote to uphold the impeachment, an election will be held in sixty days and voters will elect a new president, who is very likely to come from the liberal party since Yoon's popularity has wrecked his party's popularity in polls.[10] Polls are not an exact science and can have great errors; however, a poll showing Yoon's approval at eleven percent would need to have a dramatic error to show his popularity. If the Democratic Party wins the presidency, they may amend the constitution to provide more checks on presidential power and reform martial law declarations. Additionally, the Democratic Party will likely have control over the parliament and can reform domestic and foreign policy goals from the previous administration. If the People Power Party is returned to office under a different executive, it's likely politics will remain a stand-still between an opposing parliament and president, which may appear like a check, but fails to rectify any of the issues underlying this crisis.

However, if the Constitutional Court does not uphold the impeachment, President Yoon is immediately returned to office and retains power for another three years. If this happens, South Korean politics are likely to erupt into chaos. The parliament, which was already hawkishly opposed to Yoon, is likely to stop working on any legislation with Yoon and pass only what is necessary to keep the government operational. While this would represent a check on presidential power, it does little to rectify cracks in South Korean democracy and grants another president the opportunity to take power from the parliament, threatening to transform this crisis into a dangerous tradition. Additionally, protests will ignite across the nation as seventy percent people oppose Yoon's dictatorial gamble,[11] but little can be done to rectify their rage after the courts refuse to hold Yoon accountable. Yoon, having tested the guardrails of democracy and seeing no permanent consequence, would be further empowered to act undemocratically and could attempt to usurp power from the legislature or judiciary. He would return to office with public approval ratings at record lows and an unwieldy parliament.

South Korean politics cannot just continue as if nothing happened, a parliament is needed to change the constitution to avert further crises, not just deadlock politics. Yoon's desire to kneecap democracy has been made clear, and restoring his power and position threatens South Korean democracy in the short and long term. Democracies around the world are

> Democracies around the world are seeing authoritarians gain more power; but, South Korea's authoritarian history, inflamed polarization, and lackluster checks on power place the nation's democracy in jeopardy this year.

seeing authoritarians gain more power; but, South Korea's authoritarian history, inflamed polarization, and lackluster checks on power place the nation's democracy

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The Global Political Economy Following Donald Trump's Re-Election: An Analysis of Changes and Developments

Dr. Beatrice Alupo
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The global political economy is an intertwined and constantly evolving system influenced by several factors, including leadership transitions within “powerful” economies, global partnerships, and bilateral trade deals. The re-election of Donald Trump in the United States and new policies in his first one hundred days offer economists, political analysts, and intellectuals a unique opportunity to analyze the global political economy. The 2024 re-election of Donald Trump has not been different because of its profound implications for the global political economy. As one of the world's largest economies with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 30.51 trillion in terms of purchasing power parity next to China’s 19.23 trillion, the United States plays a pivotal role in shaping international finance, trade, and foreign policy. President Trump's America First policies and foreign policy have considerably impacted the global stage. Trump’s tariff increases and cuts in USAID present a looming *economic war* presented by a striking storm of changes to existing agreements and shifts in alliances. - confirming a concern by many: “he is returning like the wrecking ball.”

During President Trump's first presidential term, his approach to international trade was marked by a preference for bilateral agreements and skepticism towards multilateral trade deals. His administration renegotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), resulting in the United States–Mexico (Canada) agreement and imposed tariffs on several countries, including China and the European Union. President Trump's re-election flagged the continuation of his 'America First' Trade Policy, which emphasized the protection of American industries and workers. This policy, first introduced in 2017, was intended to stabilize supply chains, amass economic growth, historically lower inflation, and substantiate an increase in real wages and real median household wealth to address unbalanced and unfair trade, which could lead to a destructive trade deficit. The policy, focusing on American protectionism, has significantly disrupted global trade, increasing tensions and uncertainty in the international trade arena, but has also pushed other nations together, fostering conversations to move away from Western and American powers. For instance, the BRICS bloc and other Middle Eastern trades alliances are forging adaptability and resilience to compete favorably in the global economy.

The trade war with China continues to define aspects of Trump's presidency

The trade war with China continues to shape aspects of President Trump's presidency. Imposing up to 145% tariffs on several Chinese exports, the tariffs and subsequent retaliatory measures by President Xi drive mistrust in global markets. The likely outcome will be a rise in consumer prices, disproportionately affecting households whose wages have not kept pace with inflation. This ongoing trade war has prompted several countries, including Japan and South Korea, to rethink their trade dependency on the United States, potentially shifting global trade alliances. This trend echoes the post-2008 global financial crisis realignments and could lead to the emergence of new, more regionally integrated trade blocs. While the long-term consequences of the U.S.-China trade war remain uncertain, it has underscored the need

for adaptability and resilience in economic governance, with nations increasingly pursuing diversification to mitigate exposure to trade war risk.

President Trump's re-election also resulted in sustained tension in trade relations with Europe. His administration firmly opposed European products, particularly automobiles, and agricultural goods. By 2023, European exports to the US amounted to approximately £500bn. Nonetheless, this is likely to drastically shift in 2025, given that the US, on March 12, 2025, announced 25% tariffs and trade restrictions on European exports, resulting in tensions with the World Trade Organization (WTO). Several European nations have strengthened intra-European trade relations while others such as the United Kingdom have sought trade deals with the U.S. In addition, countries traditionally relying on American investments are shifting priorities because of President Trump's administration's focus on encouraging domestic investment, which influences global Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) patterns. This leads to uncertain trade agreements and tariffs, which create curiosity among investors and impact FDI flows through the United States, resulting in reduced consumer goods and services costs for socioeconomically disadvantaged communities.

Moreover, financial markets responded to President Trump's reelection with mixed responses. On the one hand, his pro-business policies, including tax cuts and deregulation, were favorable for American corporations and the stock market. On the other hand, trade tensions and unpredictable diplomatic strategies have introduced volatility, leading to investor uncertainty and fluctuating market performance. These conditions highlight risks and instability associated with the current administration’s economic policies. While some elites may capitalize on market dislocations, the broader implications could exacerbate socioeconomic disparities, leaving lower- and middle-income Americans more vulnerable to economic shocks. The long-term consequences for the strength and stability of the U.S. dollar, as well as its role in global financial systems, remain a subject of growing concern among economists and international investors.

President Trump's criticism of the Northern Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and insistence on increased defense spending from member nations strained transatlantic relations. His re-election has intensified pressure on his allies, such as Canada, to reassess their reliance on US. A deal to purchase F-35 stealth fighter jets from the U.S. for $13.3 billion is under reexamination by Canada due to trade tariffs and the concern that future F-35 Fighter jet software updates may not be honored. Fears that it’s defense initiatives could be jeopardized has left Canada to seek alternative alliances for its defense investments and reassess its security strategies with the European Union. Such a shift in alliances will lock out the US, which has been a major supplier of defense equipment. Additionally, European countries have expanded efforts to strengthen their own defense capacities, including increased deployments of their armed forces to support the Ukraine.

President Trump’s re-election has greatly impacted global alliances and conflicts. His administration's foreign policy diverged from traditional diplomatic practices, with a nationalist approach that left many world leaders with mixed reactions. Among these, Russian President Vladimir Putin and the BRICS bloc. While the Trump administration moved swiftly toward addressing the Russia-Ukraine war, it was slower in addressing the Israel-Palestine conflict. This has further deepened the tension in the Middle East where Trump's foreign policy reinforces maintaining political support for Israel and strategic alliances with selected Arab Gulf States. The geopolitical environment in the Middle East has become increasingly polarized, affecting global oil markets, and regional stability. New energy trade dynamics have emerged, including indirect oil transactions—such as India acting as an intermediary supplier to Germany and other NATO member states—reflecting a shifting global energy flows. While President Trump has continued to back Prime Minister Netanyahu, recurring instability continues to be costly for innocent civilians, despite a ceasefire announced on January 19, 2025. Humanitarian crises continue while the ongoing conflict exacerbates long-term instability in the region.

To protect his foreign policy moves, President Trump has also displayed a willingness to leverage U.S. economic power as a tool to exert influence. For example, South Africa has seen the imposition of sanctions by the U.S, including reduced aid and military support, and a-25% tariff on vehicles and vehicle parts exported to the US. The sanctions are viewed as a response to South Africa’s support of the International Court of Justice’s call for arrest warrants for Israeli and Hamas fighters who have

committed atrocities during the Israel-Palestine War.

Donald Trump's presidency has been marked by a significant rollback of environmental regulations and withdrawal from international climate agreements, most notably the United States' second exit from the Paris Agreement. This decision was largely due to concerns that the U.S. would be funding politicized agendas. For example, at COP26 in 2020, countries such as China and India declined to participate, accusing European nations of using the climate agenda to pressure developing countries—particularly over restrictions on coal usage—for political gain. The U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and the reduced emphasis on renewable energy under the Trump administration dampened global climate ambitions and policy progress. Other nations – many in the Global South where the impacts of climate change are most acute—are left to compensate for the lack of American involvement. This has led to increased collaboration between European countries and other global leaders in climate action to mitigate against the adverse effects of President Trump's climate policies. The focus on fossil fuel extractions under the Trump administration has led to a shift in global energy markets, potentially altering the dynamics of international energy agreements and affecting global efforts to address climate change. In fact, many world leaders have also been concerned about President Trump's health policies, as he had threatened to leave the World Health Organization (WHO) in his first term because its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, while supporting hydrochloroquine as a treatment.

President Trump's re-election has significant and diverse impacts on the global political economy. His governance style has shaped the international landscape, from trade policies and financial markets to geopolitical alliances and climate initiatives. While other nations are adapting to these changes, the shift in global political economic experiences and realignments necessitates further analysis as to whether Trump's foreign and economic policies are geared towards collapsing globalization.

Dr. Beatrice Alupo has conducted research with practical implications. Her thesis, which focused on 'Uganda's refugee settlement approach's responsiveness to the needs and interests of settled refugee women,' provides valuable insights for improving refugee settlement policies. Currently, she lectures on welfare systems and services for Acknowledge Education in Sydney, Australia. Her research interests, particularly human and gender rights and intersectionality, inspire hope for a more inclusive and equitable future.

Ukraine: A Business Deal or an Existential Deal - That is the Question

Dr. David Phillips
United States

The United States, despite its enthusiastic celebration of independence from Britain on July 4, has not always supported independence fighters elsewhere. This may be because their fight for freedom has been interpreted in terms of U.S. longer term strategy, realpolitik, or dismissed as a cover for something else (like a communist take-over). For example, the fight of the Vietnamese against French colonialism was interpreted by the U.S. not as an independence struggle (even though Ho Chi Minh had explicitly sought U.S. support for it) but as within the domino theory of communist expansion in Asia.

While the U.S. obviously played a critical role in the World Wars, and has assisted the Philippines, defended South Korea, helped the Mujihadeen, supported the Arab Spring and the creation of an independent State, Israel, it has also given only partial support, if any, to independence struggles in South Africa, Algeria, Kurdistan, Palestine, Iran, Congo, Chile, as well as Vietnam, amongst other places.

What about Ukraine? For three years the U.S. has provided assistance to the people of that country struggling with huge loss of life against a brutal and far stronger, imperialistic invader that is, ironically, also a 'brotherly' Slavic State. But now Ukraine faces the prospect of fighting for its existence, as a State, as a culture, and as a people, without critical support from the U.S., essentially alone. By comparison, in the Revolutionary War the stakes were nowhere near as high as this – that war was against an imperial power but it's trigger was tax oppression to pay for the wars of King George, not an existential battle for the survival of the American colonies.

If a people have been fighting for their lives for a long time against a brutal invader then mediators who are trying to end the fighting have to have an understanding of history and to recognize the very high probability that the independence fighters do not see the ending of the fighting as just a 'business deal' (like say a building contract, or a treaty between equal opponents) that requires 'give' and 'take' on both sides. This is because some 'gives' in this case are incredibly risky and dangerous for the giver, and it needs ironclad commitments - in a world where commitments are shaky (i.e., these are very heavily weighted 'gives') – one 'give' is worth many, many 'takes'. So the defending side will most likely have non-negotiable minimum conditions to ensure its viable existence.

The U.S. negotiators will fail if they don't understand this – unless of course they intend to use their power to extract a result regardless of the interests of the defenders.

In this context we might ask ourselves whether it would have been acceptable for an outside power to pressure George Washington to sue for peace - i.e., surrender to a seemingly overwhelming invading force - just before he crossed the Delaware River. Probably not. And consider

...we might ask ourselves whether it would have been acceptable for an outside power to pressure George Washington to sue for peace - i.e., surrender to a seemingly overwhelming invading force - just before he crossed the Delaware River.

also that it took about nine months of complex multi-channel interactions to develop enough trust on either side of the Oslo Accords, and even the famous Arafat/Rabin handshake of Sept 1993 under the eye of Bill Clinton was not enough to prevent the agreements falling apart a few years later because of unbridgeable differences.

For Ukraine, simple arrogance and arm-twisting (or extortionary pressure) on the part of U.S. negotiators will definitely never remove unbridgeable differences. A construction contract is not the same thing as a contract with an aggressive invader.

Dr. David Phillips grew up in Africa and is a development specialist who, after starting in the private sector, has worked for most of his career in development agencies including the World Bank, and as an academic, specializing in industry and private sector development. He has worked as a long-term adviser and representative, living in Tanzania, Nepal, and Belarus. Dr. Phillips was director of a consulting firm based in the UK and US. He has a PhD in the area of technology and development and is the author of the books, *Development Without Aid* and *Reforming the World Bank: Twenty Years of Trial - and Error*.


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